# WILDFOWL

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GRAHAM CATLEY

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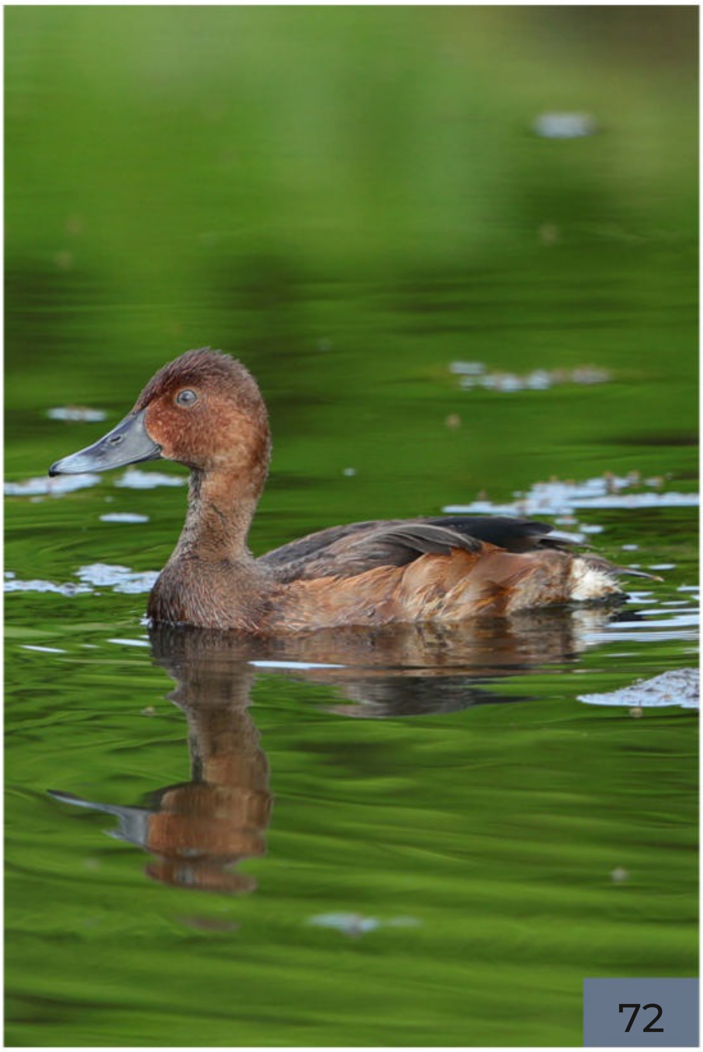
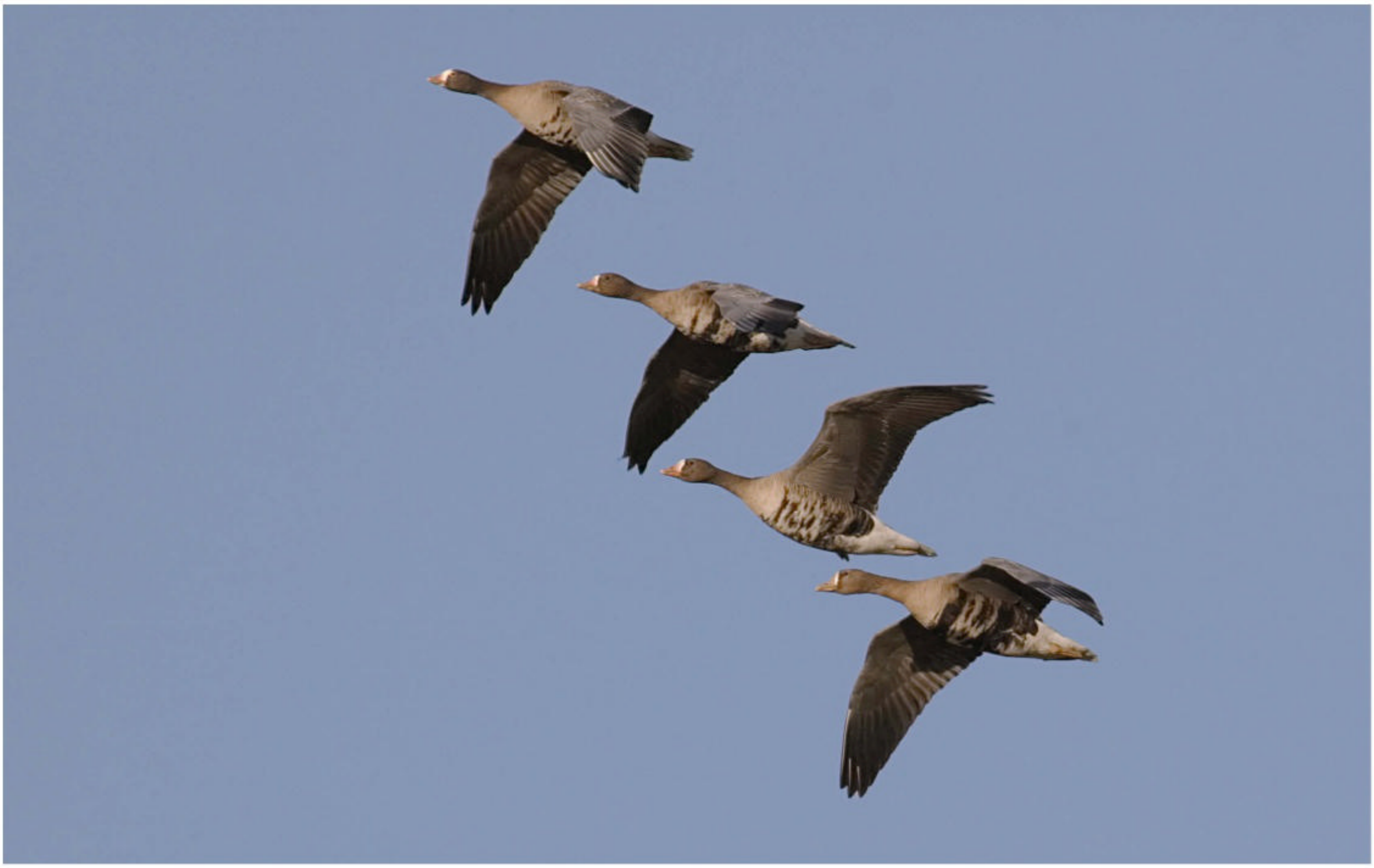
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)



AURÉLIEN AUDEVARD

# Greater and Lesser White-fronted Geese

Words by Andy Stoddart



HANS GEBUIS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

ONE: Lesser and Greater White-fronted Geese (Strijen, The Netherlands, 14 December 2005). This wonderful image captures beautifully the two species of white-fronted goose together. The Lesser White-fronted Goose (top) looks only a little smaller here, but its short, small bill, short neck and rather rounded head profile are more obvious. Also visible are the Lesser's bold yellow eyering and extensive white forehead patch which extends onto the fore-crown. The belly barring is also typically rather weak.

Named for the white patch on the forehead, both Greater and Lesser White-fronted Geese occur in Britain in winter. The former can be seen around British and Irish coasts in relatively good numbers during the colder months, while the latter is now very rare and finding one is a real challenge. Separating these similar geese is an ID challenge, and to add to this, two subspecies of Greater are found in Britain – Russian and Greenland. Andy Stoddart provides all the information you need to identify these sought-after geese in all plumages.

# Basic Principles

The 'white-fronted geese' comprise two species: Greater White-fronted Goose and Lesser White-fronted Goose. The subspecies taxonomy of the former has long been controversial, but only two taxa are of real relevance in Britain: Russian and Greenland White-fronted Geese. These need to be separated from each other and also, on very rare occasions, from Lesser White-fronted Goose.

## Russian White-fronted Goose

Although sometimes termed 'European' or 'Eurasian' White-fronted Goose, the breeding range of this form extends across northern Russia. Eastern populations winter in East Asia, mainly in China, Japan and Korea, with those from central Siberia wintering in Europe, largely in The Netherlands, south-east Europe and around the Black and Caspian Seas.

In Britain this goose winters in southern England, particularly in East Anglia, but occasional influxes from the large wintering Dutch population can see birds turn up more widely. This subspecies favours wet grassland rather than stubble or sugar beet fields and – although not an inviolate rule – tends to remain in single-species flocks rather than mixing with other geese.

This is a medium-to-large goose with a relatively square-looking head and a rather short, triangular bill. Adult Russian White-fronts have a small white 'front' (actually the forehead) and highly variable black belly barring.

Juveniles and early first-winter birds (the white 'front' and black belly markings are acquired during the first winter) lack these features and identification hinges on those characters common to all ages – medium grey-brown plumage with little tonal contrast between the neck and body, darkish feathering around the bill base, a slightly paler face, a pink bill (although the true colour can be difficult to discern in some lights), no apparent eyering, a dark grey tail broadly tipped with white, and orange legs and feet.

Young birds which lack the white front and belly barring need to be distinguished with care from Pink-footed, both bean and Greylag Geese.

In flight, the white-fronted geese lack the prominent pale grey forewing of Pink-footed and Greylag Geese and the upperwing therefore appears darker and more uniform. The call is a high-pitched *lyo-lyok*, with a musical or laughing quality.

## Greenland White-fronted Goose

This subspecies is quite distinct from all other white-fronted geese and has been proposed as a species in its own right. It has a relatively small population (around 24,000 birds), breeds in west Greenland and winters mainly in Ireland and on Islay, Argyll. Away from these traditional sites, it is a rare bird, but can sometimes be found in flocks of Pink-footed Geese. In winter it favours wet moorland and tussocky grassland, in which it disperses in small family groups rather than assembling in large flocks.

It resembles its Russian counterpart, but is slightly larger with a heavier bill and a longer, thicker neck; it averages darker brown overall. The belly barring on adults is also highly variable in its extent but can be more extensive, with some birds having almost wholly black bellies.

The white tip to the tail is narrower than on Russian birds but, most importantly, the bill is carrot-orange and therefore matches the legs (although the pink bills of Eurasian birds can appear orange in some lights and clear views are required to be sure of the colour).

The call resembles that of Russian White-front.

## Lesser White-fronted Goose

This species is monotypic and confined to the Palearctic. It breeds from northern Scandinavia eastwards across Siberia. Eastern birds winter mainly in eastern China, while western birds head south-west to Europe. Eastern Hungary and around the Black and Caspian Seas are traditional destinations, with birds wintering among the vast flocks of Russian White-fronts there.

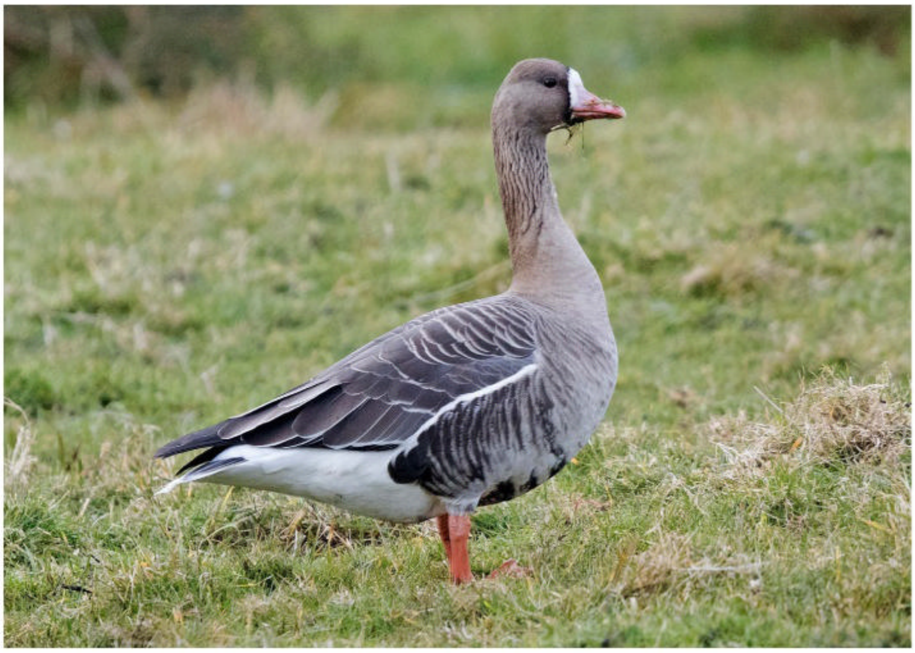
It is, however, very rare throughout its range, and particularly in the west, with a world population of only around 28,000-33,000 birds. It is declining steadily and is a Red-listed Species of Conservation Concern. In recent years the Scandinavian population has become almost extirpated and has been augmented by reintroduction schemes, birds from which winter at traditional sites in The Netherlands.

In Britain this species used to be an annual vagrant, mainly among Russian White-fronts at Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, but also in the Yare Valley, Norfolk, among Taiga Bean Geese. Occurrences at these sites have now ceased, however, and today this species is an extreme rarity in Britain, with any future individuals most likely deriving from Scandinavian/Dutch reintroduction activity.

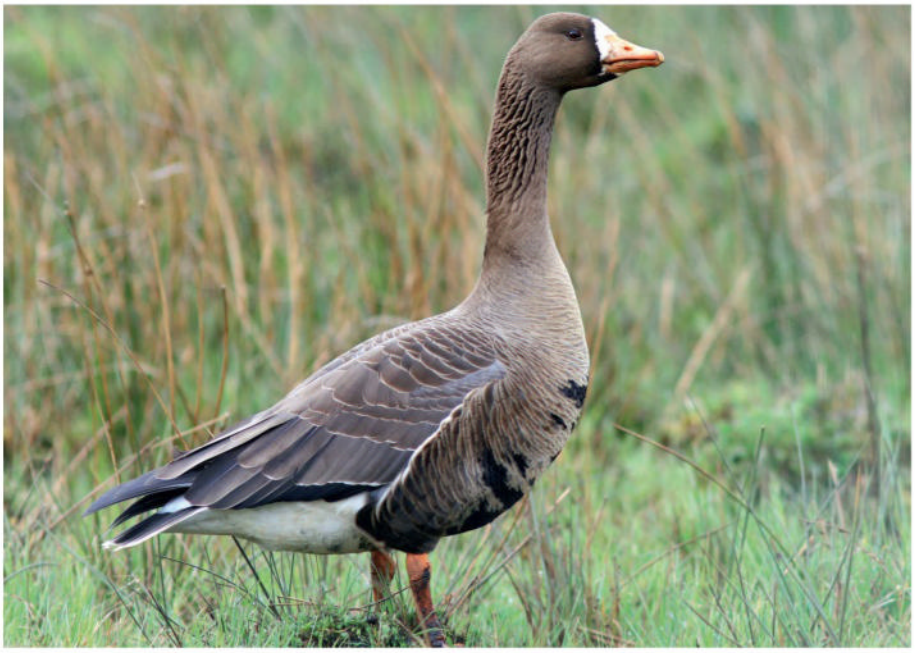
This is a small, compact goose, smaller than Greater White-front and often picked out on this feature alone. It differs structurally too, having a particularly small, short bill, a rather oval, 'high-crowned' head with a steep forehead, a short neck (another good feature at long range), short legs and relatively long wings which project well beyond the tail-tip. Lesser White-fronts feed actively and may move more rapidly through flocks of larger geese, thereby aiding their detection.

Adults resemble Russian White-fronts in their basic plumage hues and bare parts colours, but are a little darker overall and have a more extensive white front which extends higher on the forehead and can reach the mid-crown. This can be surprisingly hard to judge on a head-on view, but is perhaps easier to evaluate from the side. Adults also have, on average, less extensive belly barring. The other important feature common to all ages is a neat yellow eyering.

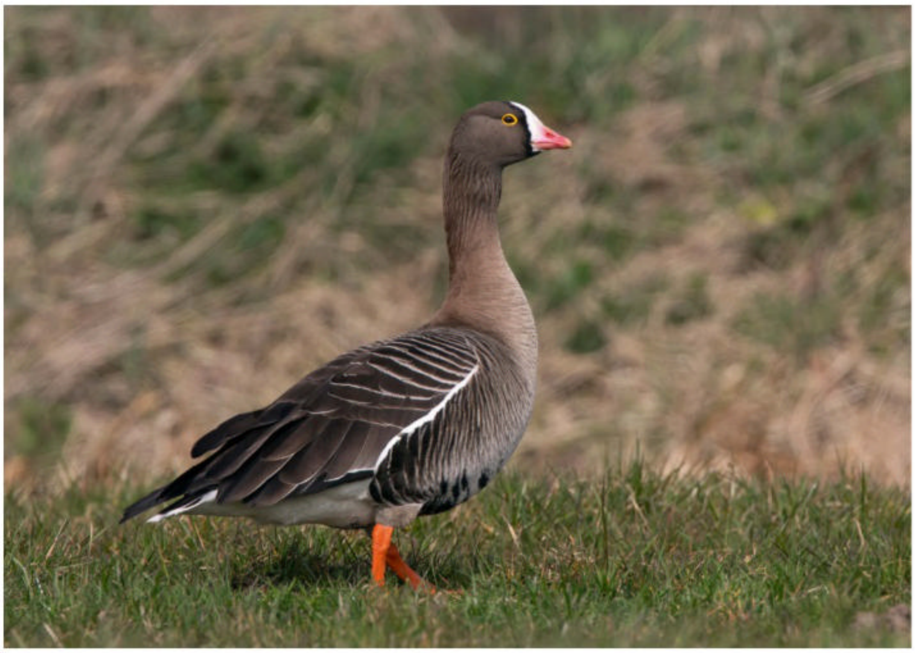
The call resembles that of Greater White-front, but is even higher pitched.


ANDREW MOON

TWO: Russian White-fronted Goose (North Warren RSPB, Aldeburgh, Suffolk, 23 February 2018). Russian White-fronted Geese are rather unexceptional in their structure, but note the rather long neck, square-looking head and medium-length triangular bill. The plumage is typically a rather pale grey-brown with no appreciable darkening on the head and neck. The restricted white forehead is plain enough here, but note also the line of darker feathering which separates it from the rest of the face, and the lack of any yellow eyering. The belly barring is highly variable and is rather weak on this individual. Finally, note also the rather broad white tip to the tail.

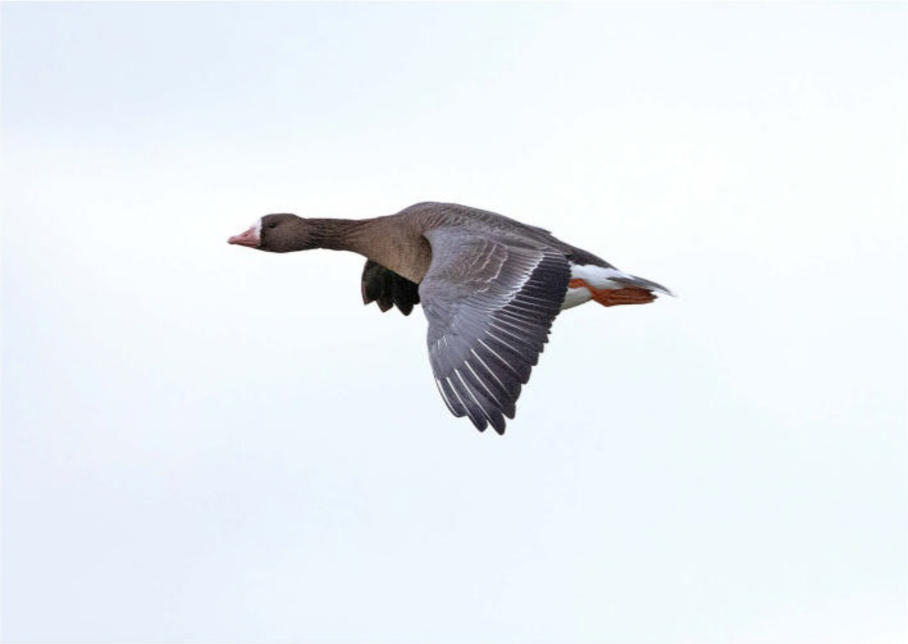

PETE MORRIS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

THREE: Greenland White-fronted Goose (Islay, Argyll, 17 April 2014). Although on its own, this Greenland White-fronted Goose still manages to look quite big and long necked, as well as rather dark, more earth-brown than its Russian counterpart. Most features are shared between the two subspecies, but note here the rather heavy and bright orange bill which matches the colour of the legs. In addition, the white tip to the tail is noticeably narrow.


EDWIN WINKEL (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

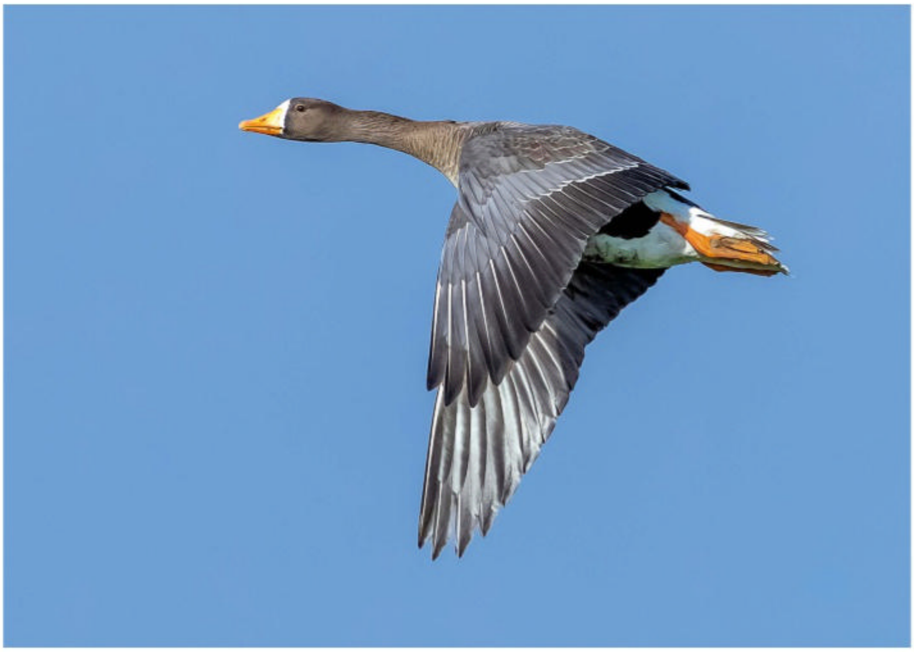
FOUR: Lesser White-fronted Goose (Zwolle, The Netherlands, 18 March 2015). Lesser White-fronted is a small, delicate and compact goose, with long wings, short legs and neck, a high, rounded crown, slightly 'fat-looking' cheeks when viewed head on, and a short, rather petite bill. Even more striking on such a close view are the two key identification features: a bold bright yellow eyering and an extensive white forehead which extends onto the fore-crown. The belly barring is typically weak in this individual, while the head and neck are slightly darker than the body.

FIVE: Russian White-fronted Goose (North Warren RSPB, Aldeburgh, Suffolk, 22 January 2019). In flight Russian White-fronted Geese are rather unexceptional in their structure. The key forehead pattern and bill and leg colour features can be seen on this close-range individual, but at longer range, focus on the rather uniform-looking upperwing, a function of extensive brown clouding across the central wing coverts.



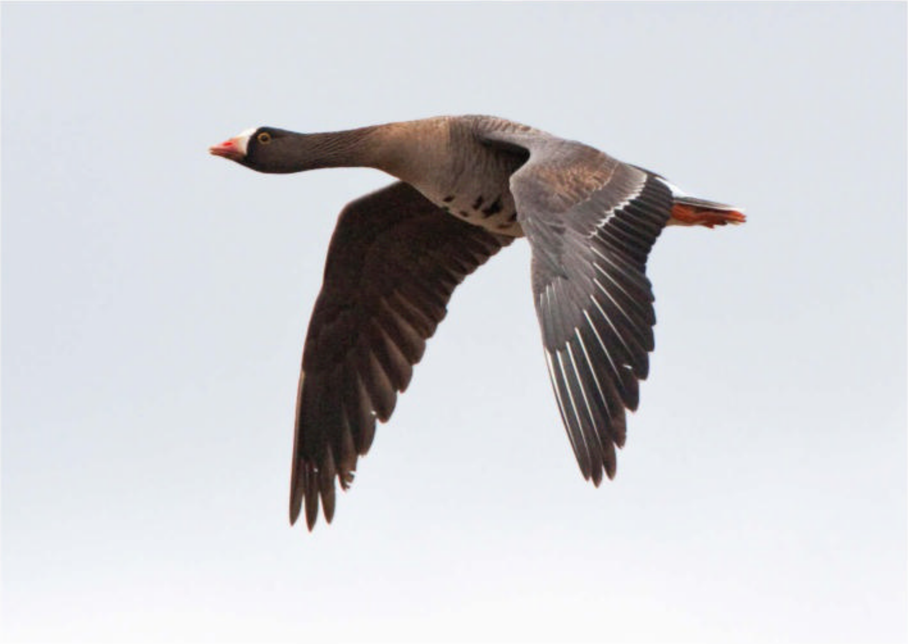
ANDREW MOON

SIX: Greenland White-fronted Goose (Zeeland, The Netherlands, 14 March 2019. This flying Greenland bird looks both large and long necked, while the bright orange bill (matching the orange legs) positively gleams in the sunshine. On a dull day, however, or at range, this would be a more problematic identification, with the bird probably just looking big and dark. Note once more the brown wash across the wing coverts which mutes the contrasts in the upperwing.



VINCENT LEGRAND (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

SEVEN: Lesser White-fronted Goose (Varanger, Norway, 10 June 2008). The short neck, rounded head and small bill of Lesser White-front are very obvious here, as are the bright yellow eyering and prominent forehead ‘blaze’. Note in particular the strong contrast between the head/neck and the body, which is never this contrasting in Greater White-fronted Goose and invites comparison with Pink-footed Goose. The weak belly barring can be seen here also.



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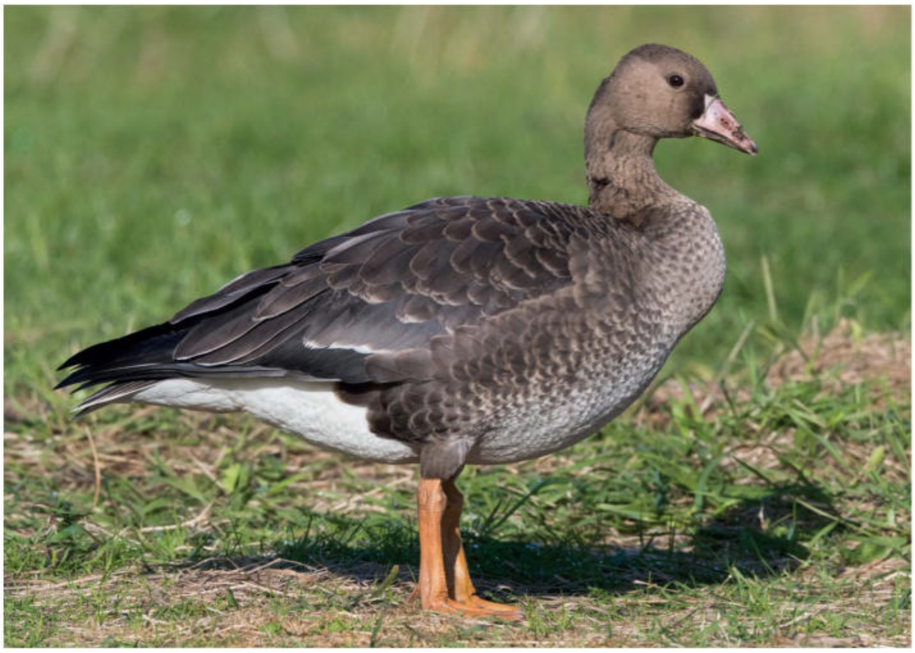
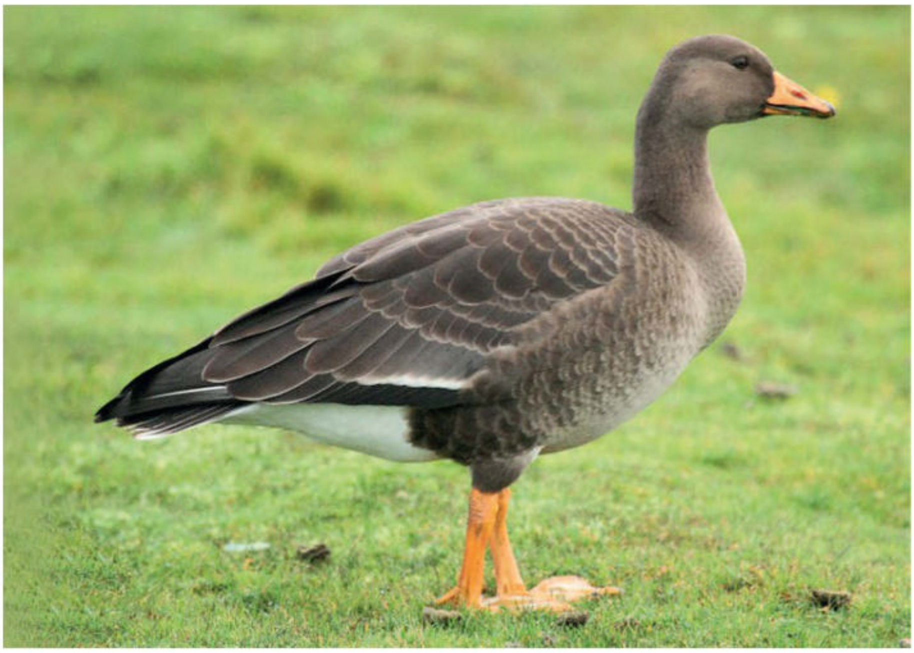


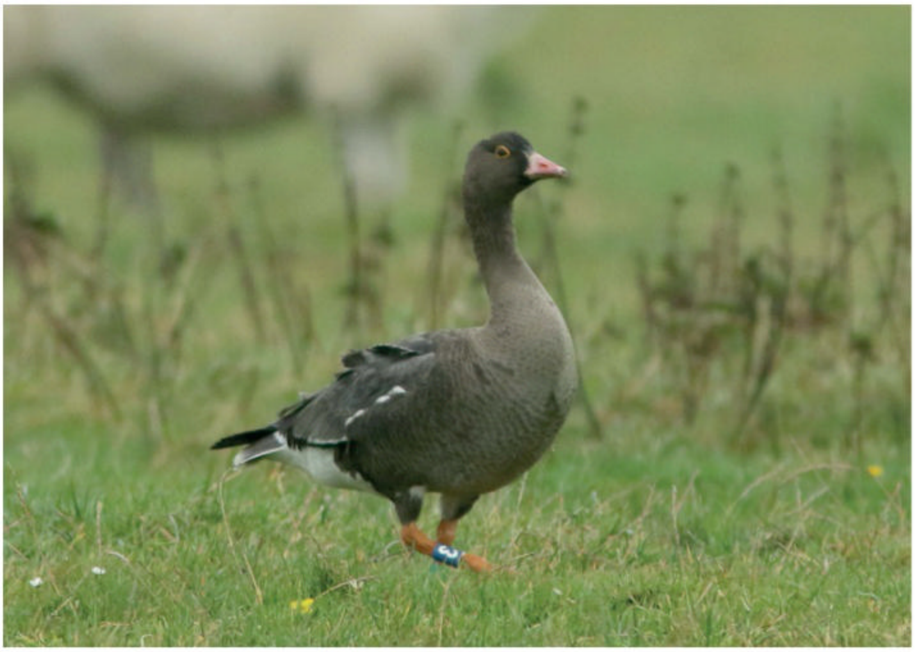
MARC GUYT (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

EIGHT: Juvenile Russian White-fronted-Goose (Vlieland, The Netherlands, 23 October 2016). This bird can easily be identified as a juvenile by the rather rounded pale fringes to its upperparts and body feathers. It lacks the white forehead and belly barring of an adult Russian White-front, but the overall structure of the bird, the grey-brown plumage hues, the medium-length triangular pink bill and the darker feathering around the bill base all readily identify it to subspecies.



JACQUI HERRINGTON

NINE: Juvenile Greenland White-fronted Goose (North Ronaldsay, Orkney, 2 November 2011). This juvenile also lacks a white forehead and belly barring, but it looks quite 'heavy' and also quite dark, being a rather rich brown; the bill is bright orange (matching the legs) and the white tip to the tail is narrow. This combination of features readily identifies this bird as a young Greenland White-front.

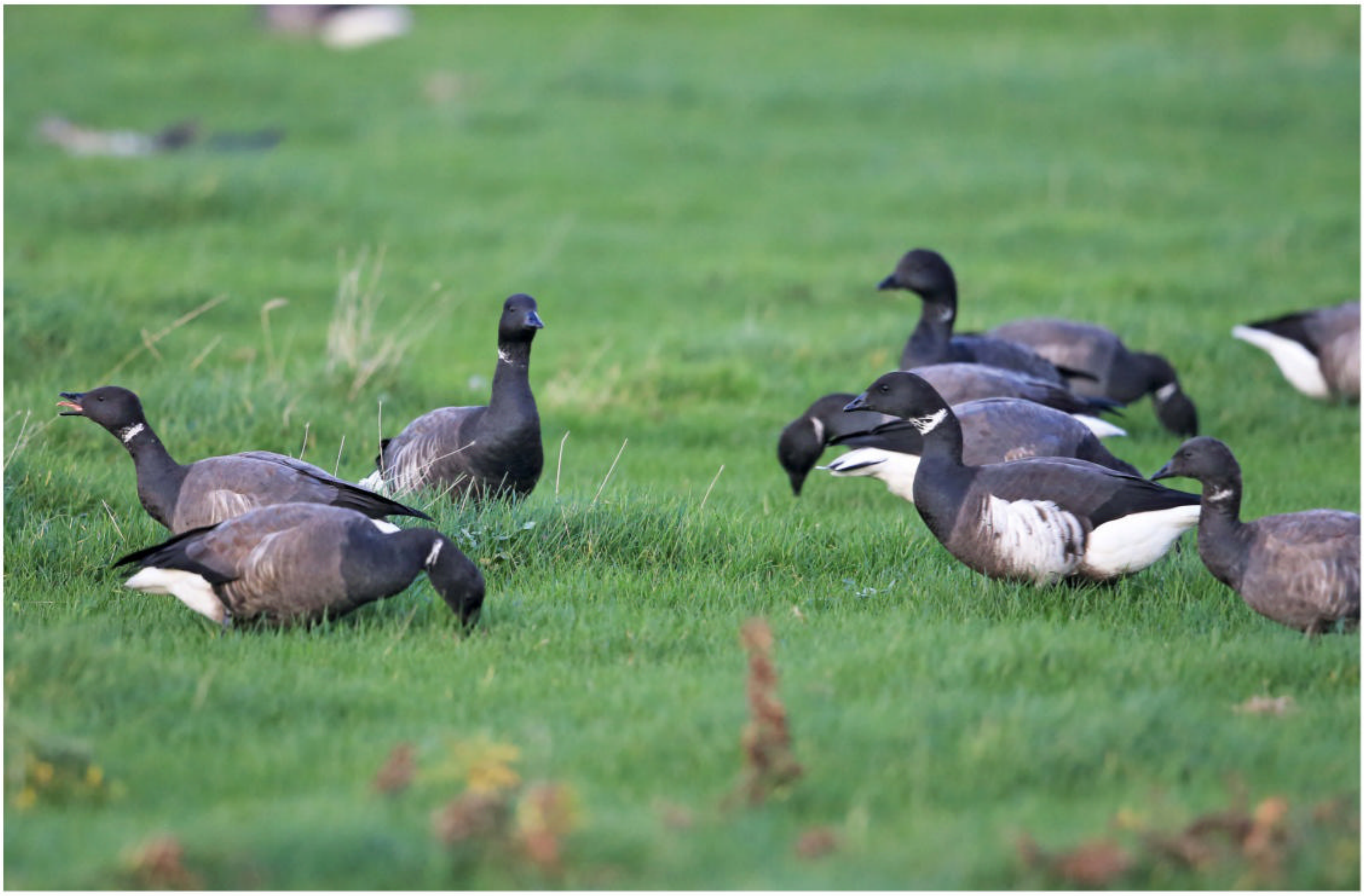


DAVID H HATTON

TEN: Juvenile Lesser White-fronted Goose (Quendale, Mainland, Shetland, 7 October 2015). This juvenile Lesser White-front similarly lacks the forehead and belly markings of an adult, but the petite structure, long wings, short neck, rounded head and short bill all indicate its identity. Note in particular that the yellow eyering is already quite developed, further confirming its identity.

# Brent Geese

Words by Andy Stoddart



ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

ONE: Black Brant (front, right) with Dark-bellied Brent Geese (Cley Marshes NWT, Norfolk, 16 November 2015). This group of Dark-bellied Brent Geese presents the usual kaleidoscope of black, white and grey plumage hues. Although changes in angle and light constantly reinvent the plumage of Brent Geese, there is another subspecies present here: an adult Black Brant standing out by virtue of its bright white flank patch, its deep and very bold white neck collar and, perhaps most importantly of all, by the strongly dark earth-brown or mahogany hues to the underparts and upperparts.

Brent Geese are an endearing staple of the winter birding scene on many estuaries, chiefly on the east and south coasts of England and around the coast of Ireland. All four of the world's Brent forms have been recorded in Britain and Ireland, but the temptation is to assume that all birds in a grazing flock are the same. Given that stray individuals or family groups of one form may still wander and turn up within flocks of another, however, that assumption would be a mistake. Andy Stoddart highlights ID tips to separate Dark-bellied and Pale-bellied Brents, Black Brant and 'Grey-bellied' Brant.

# Basic Principles

Important numbers of both Dark-bellied and Pale-bellied Brent Geese winter, Black Brant turns up annually in small numbers and the enigmatic 'Grey-bellied Brant' has been recorded in Ireland. Despite their current official treatment as subspecies, the differences between the different forms of Brent Goose are greater than between many full species and amount to much more than whether they have a dark or a pale belly. Unfortunately, their treatment in field guides, both in text and illustrations, is often cursory.

### Dark-bellied Brent Goose

There is a single population of Dark-bellied Brent Goose, breeding on the northernmost tundra of central Siberia, migrating through the Baltic and wintering mainly around the southern North Sea and in north-west France. In Britain, it winters largely between the estuaries of the Humber and the Exe.

The belly of an adult Dark-bellied Brent Goose is a smoky grey-brown, with paler upper and rear flanks caused by greyish-white feather-tipping. However, some birds can look surprisingly pale below, particularly if aligned differently to the remainder of the flock or lit by strong sunlight. Dark-bellied Brents are at their palest in spring (when they are most worn) and it is at this time of year that the risk of misidentification is greatest.

In all forms of Brent Goose, identification is always best resolved by reference to specific areas of plumage contrast rather than a more subjective assessment of colour hues. The belly of Dark-bellied Brent shows only a moderate contrast with the black breast, and little contrast with the upperparts. The dark belly also extends back between the legs as a rear-pointing triangle of dark feathering, most easily seen from behind. This means that, in flight, an adult Dark-bellied Brent always shows the strongest underpart contrast towards the rear of the bird, between the dark rear belly and the white undertail coverts. It is, however, not only the underparts which repay study. Just as important are the upperparts, which on Dark-bellied Brent are a cold ashy or steely grey-brown.

### Pale-bellied Brent Goose

Pale-bellied Brent Geese comprise three populations, two of which reach Britain. One of these breeds on Spitsbergen and Franz Josef Land and winters in Denmark and Northumberland. The other population breeds in northern Greenland and north-east Canada, migrates through Iceland and winters mainly in Ireland and westernmost Britain. The third population breeds in central Arctic Canada and winters on the American Atlantic coast. Out-of-range records in south-east England probably originate from the Spitsbergen population, though individuals accompanying other geese from the north-west (such as Pink-footed Geese) are perhaps more likely to be from Greenland or Canada.

Compared with Dark-bellied, a Pale-bellied Brent Goose can appear perhaps a little shorter-necked with a shorter, more 'barrel-shaped' body. Such differences are, however, subtle and firm identification rests entirely on plumage.

Adult Pale-bellied Brents have genuinely very pale bellies and flanks. On many, these areas are a bright chalky-white but on others they are washed with a pale muddy-brown, usually most extensive on the fore-belly. The belly therefore contrasts markedly with the black breast and the upperparts. The area between the legs is entirely white so that on a flying bird the eye-catching contrast is always towards the front of the bird, between the black breast and the whitish belly. The upperparts of Pale-bellied Brents always show distinct mid-brown hues, never grey, so that in mixed groups it can sometimes be easiest to pick out a Pale-bellied Brent by its upperparts colour. Hybrids with Dark-bellied Brents are documented but rare.

### Black Brant

Black Brant breeds in Arctic Canada, Alaska and east Siberia. Siberian birds are annual winter visitors to south-east England with Dark-bellied Brents, whereas Canadian birds reach Ireland with Pale-bellied Brents (for more on where to see Black Brant, turn to page 27 for this month's Target Bird).

Though similar in size and structure to the other forms of Brent Goose, some (perhaps particularly males) often appear rather stocky with large, rather angular heads.

Adult Black Brants show very strong black-and-white plumage contrasts, best appreciated in dull light. The white neck collar is strong and deep, and the upper and rear flanks are strikingly bright white, albeit with some grey vertical lining. The belly is very dark earth-brown, looking black in dull light, and contrasts little with the black breast and the upperparts. The area between the legs is dark, as in Dark-bellied Brent, so that in flight, in flocks of the latter, Black Brants are hard to pick out. The upperparts are dark earth-brown with no grey hues.

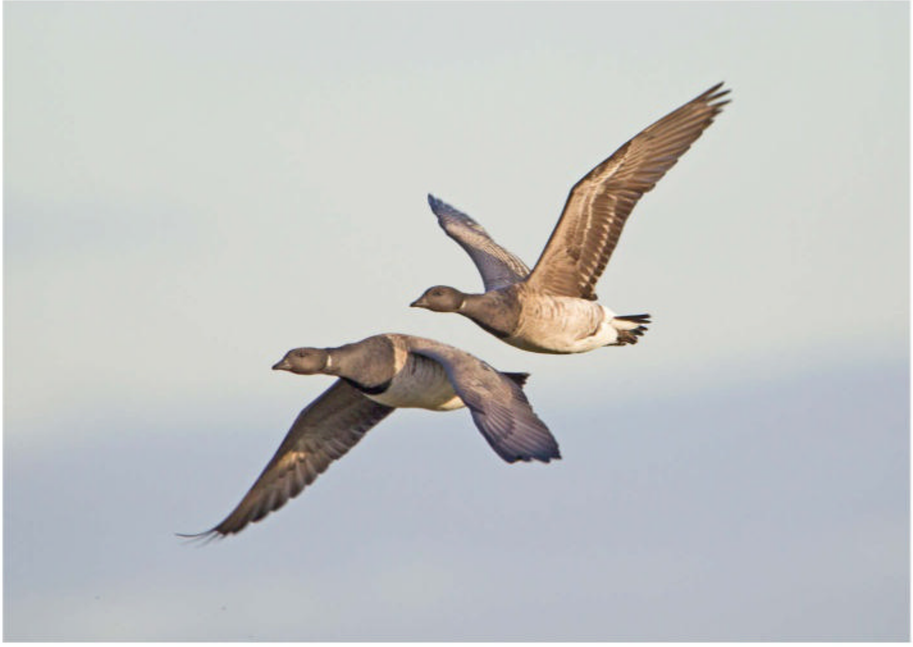
Hybrids with Dark-bellied Brents are rare but regular, with some known individuals returning to traditional winter sites and bringing second-generation hybrids. Hybrids resemble Black Brants but show tell-tale subtle grey hues throughout, with a grey wash to the white flanks and grey hues in the upperparts. Their appearance varies tremendously with the light, however, sometimes looking very Brant-like, but at other times being much less striking.

### 'Grey-bellied Brant'

A fourth Brent Goose population, breeding mainly on Melville and Prince Patrick Islands in western high-Arctic Canada, has also been recognised, though its taxonomic status remains uncertain and it has no scientific name. It is generally known colloquially as 'Grey-bellied Brant'. Its appearance is variable, combining features of both Pale-bellied Brent and Black Brant, leading to speculation that it might be an intergrade form, but it has been proposed as a valid subspecies on the basis of DNA analysis as well as morphology.

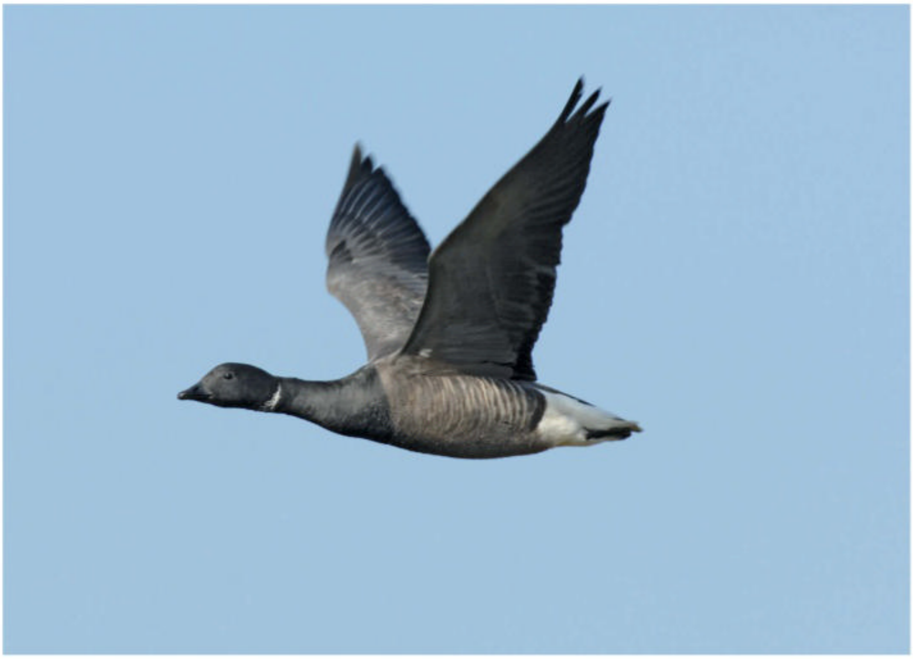
Grey-bellied Brant is not on the British list but a number of birds apparently of this type have occurred in Ireland and one or two have been suspected in Britain, too. Given that its breeding range abuts that of Canadian Pale-bellied Brents, it is clearly most likely to occur in Ireland and the west.

TWO: Adult (lower bird) and juvenile Pale-bellied Brent Geese (Donna Nook, Lincolnshire, 6 January 2011). These flying Pale-bellied Brent Geese are identifiable simply by the paleness of their bellies, but assessing precise plumage hues can be difficult. It is always better to focus on the contrast between various parts of the plumage. Here the contrast between black breast and pale belly is very strong and, crucially, the most eye-catching area on the underparts. At the other end of the bird the white central belly merges seamlessly with the white undertail coverts with no contrast visible at all – the key feature of a flying Pale-bellied Brent. Note here also the white tips across the wing coverts which identify the upper bird as a juvenile.



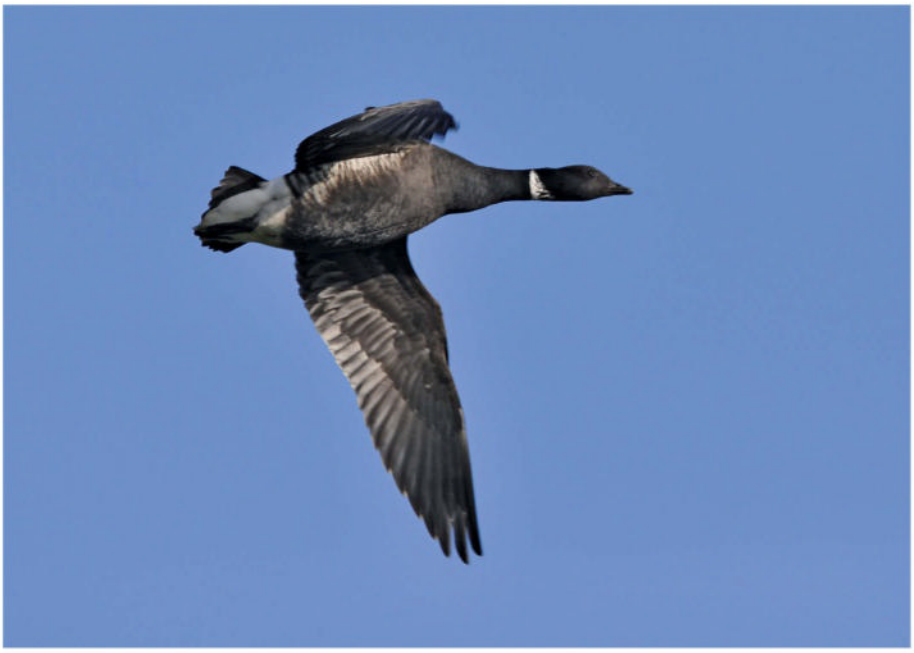
GRAHAM CATLEY

THREE: Adult Dark-bellied Brent Goose (Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk, 15 March 2007). This flying Dark-bellied Brent Goose provides a good comparison with the above image. Here the contrast between black breast and grey belly is less obvious and, most importantly, there is a strong (and greater) contrast between the dark central belly and the white undertail coverts. The most eye-catching black/white division on the underparts is therefore towards the back of the bird. The well-developed neck collar and entirely plain wing coverts (lacking any white tips) identify this bird as an adult.



RICHARD BROOKS (WWW.RICHARD-BROOKS.CO.UK)

FOUR: Adult Black Brant (Dungarvan, Co Waterford, 22 November 2009). This flying Black Brant shows an even more striking 'back end' contrast, as the very dark belly is almost the same tone as the black breast. The very white flank patch is visible here, too – although partly in shadow – but note how its shape differs from that at rest. On the ground the white rear flanks form a solid almost rectangular patch, whereas in flight the patch appears more elongated, projecting well forward along the upper flanks and almost reaching the leading edge of the wing. The very deep and bold white neck collar is also visible here.



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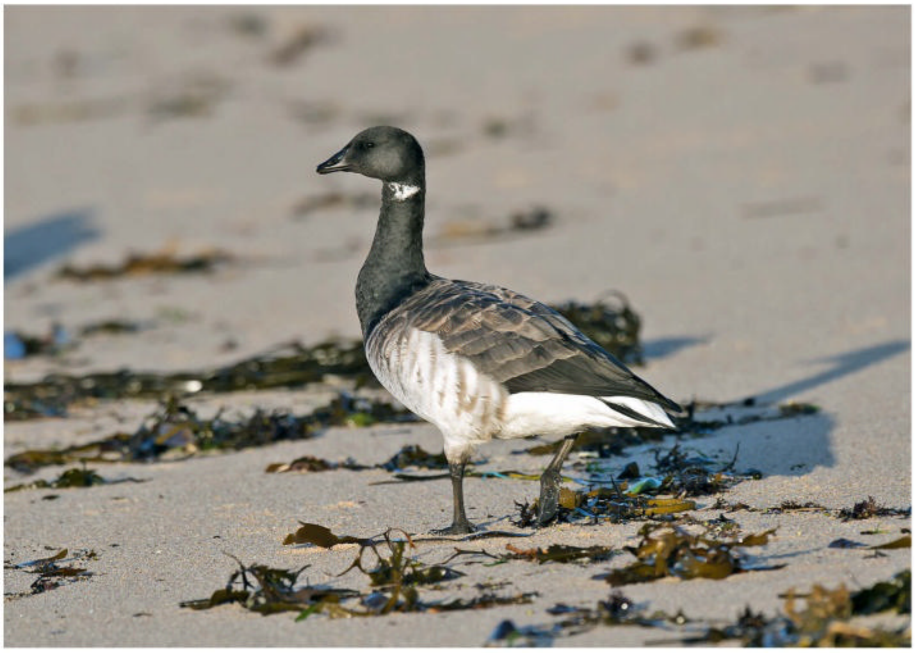
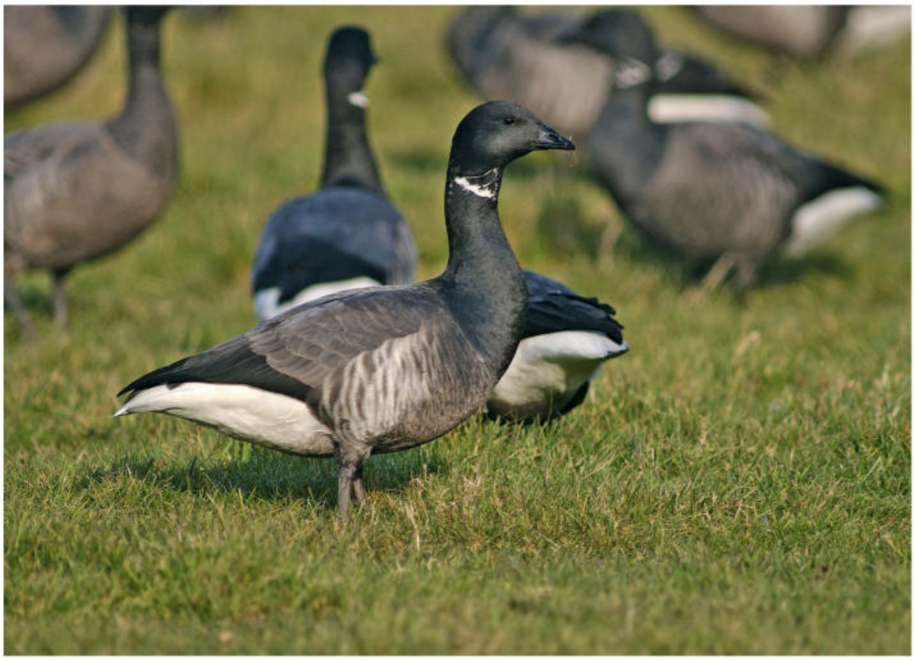


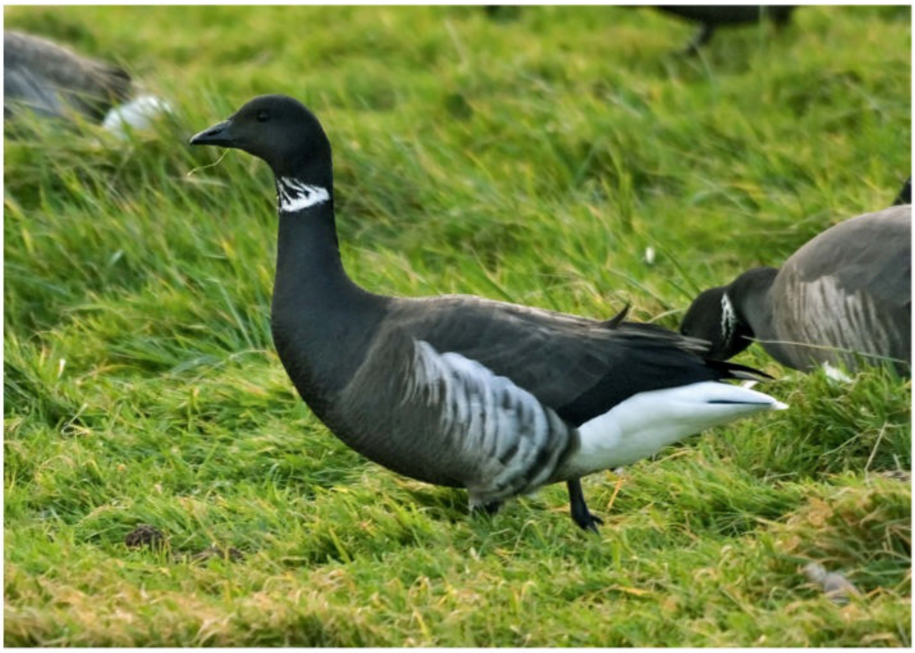
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

FIVE: Adult Pale-bellied Brent Goose (St Mary's, Scilly, 18 October 2012). With its bright chalky-white underparts, striking belly/breast contrast and extensive bright white area between the legs, this is a straightforward Pale-bellied Brent Goose. Note also the relatively weak neck collar and, more importantly, the obvious brown hues in the upperparts, something never shown by Dark-bellied Brent Goose. Although a very subtle character indeed, the bird also appears a little short-bodied.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

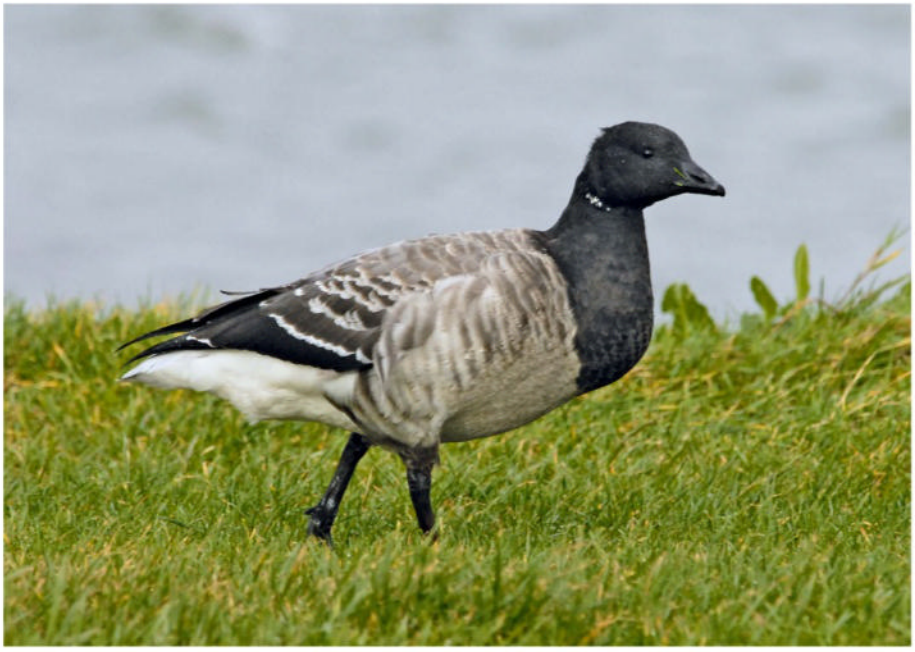
SIX: Adult Dark-bellied Brent Goose (Morston, Norfolk, 27 February 2003). With its dull grey belly, weak belly/breast contrast and strong belly/undertail coverts contrast, this is a typical Dark-bellied Brent Goose. The neck collar is typically moderately prominent but the most important feature is the obvious grey 'glaze' over the plumage, particularly the upperparts. Such 'battleship grey' hues are typical, indeed diagnostic, of Dark-bellied Brent Goose. Finally, note the very fractionally longer body profile than the above Pale-bellied Brent.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

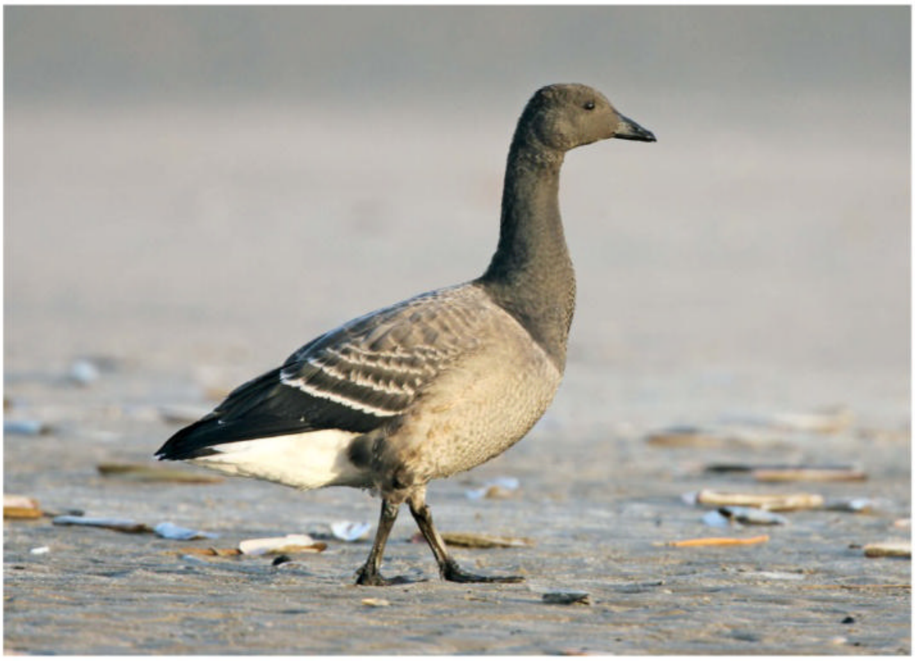
SEVEN: Adult Black Brant (Morston, Norfolk, 25 January 2008). With its bold black-and-white contrasts, this Black Brant is a striking bird indeed. The belly/breast contrast is very weak, the belly/undertail coverts contrast is very strong and the white flank patch is extensive and bright (albeit inlaid with some dark vertical lining). The most important feature, however, is the rich deep brown coloration in the belly and the upperparts – a feature never shown by Dark-bellied Brent Goose. Note also the typically bold and deep neck collar.

EIGHT: Juvenile Pale-bellied Brent Goose (Dublin, Ireland, 7 December 2006). The lines of bold white tips to the wing coverts clearly identify this bird as a juvenile. Note also the newly emerging but still very small neck collar. The belly is fully juvenile but new adult feathers are appearing in the flanks. The juvenile belly feathers of Pale-bellied and Dark-bellied Brents can be quite pale and very similar, so this bird needs closer examination. Here the new flank feathers appear quite white, strongly indicating Pale-bellied Brent. In a less advanced individual with fully juvenile underparts, the best way to identify it may well be to look at its accompanying parents.



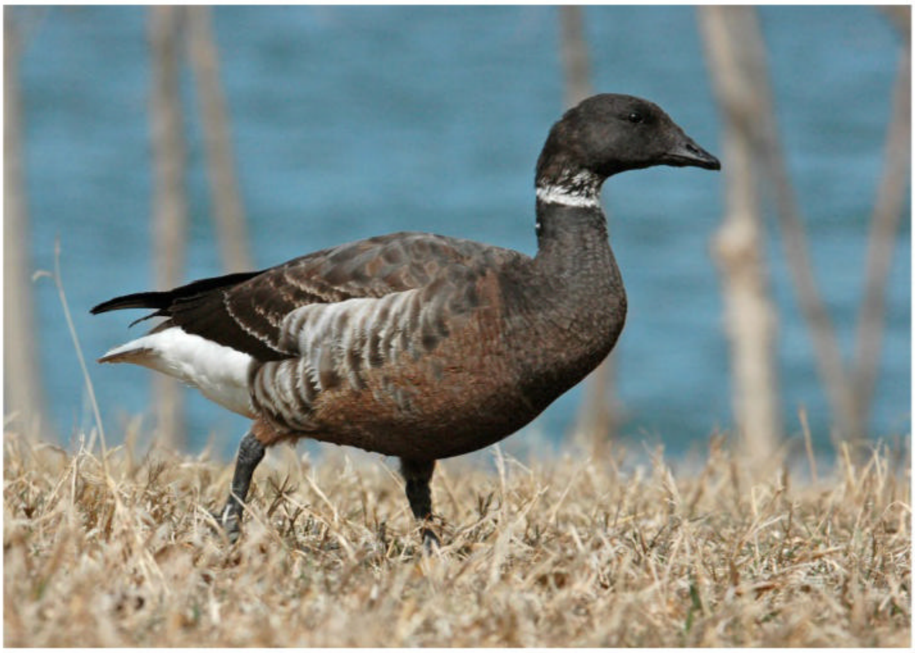
PAUL KELLY (WWW.IRISHBIRDIMAGES.COM)

NINE: Juvenile Dark-bellied Brent Goose (Katwijk, The Netherlands, 24 November 2007). Photographed in strong sunlight, this juvenile bird (note the white-tipped wing coverts and the complete lack of a neck collar) appears very pale-bellied, but it is not a Pale-bellied Brent Goose. The juvenile underparts of the two subspecies can be very similar, but if in doubt, the best strategy is to work out its identity by reference to its parents.

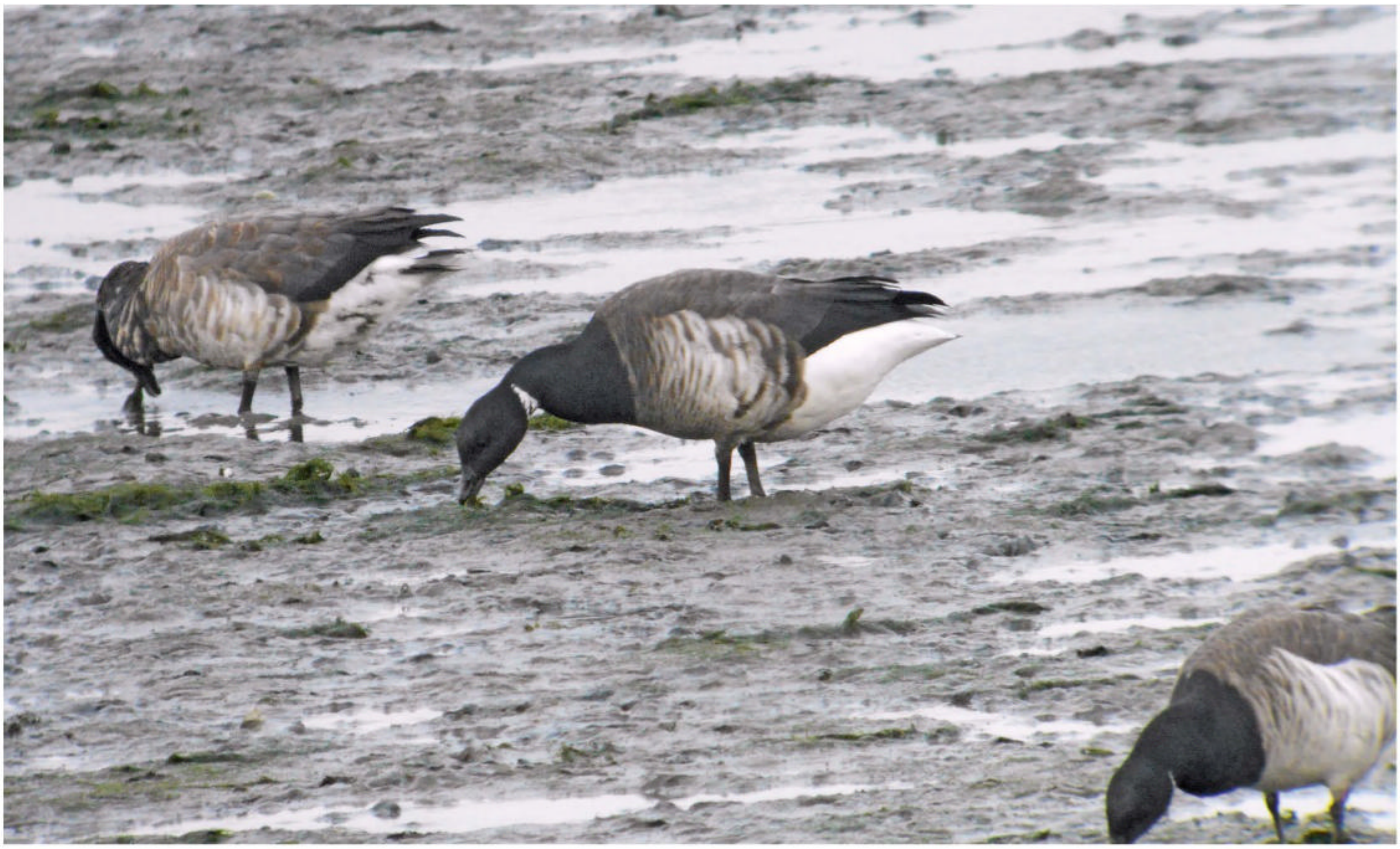


MENNO VAN DUIJN (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

TEN: Juvenile Black Brant (Colorado, USA, 19 March 2005). This juvenile Black Brant was photographed in early spring and is much more advanced in its moult into adult plumage than the early winter birds pictured above. The white tips to the wing coverts are narrow and almost worn away, while an obvious adult pattern has emerged on the belly and flanks. The neck collar is also fully developed. These adult features – a bold white flank patch (albeit with dark vertical lining), a bold, deep neck collar and brown hues in the upperparts identify it as a Black Brant. The rusty-brown hues on the underparts of this bird are not typical and seem to be the result of staining.

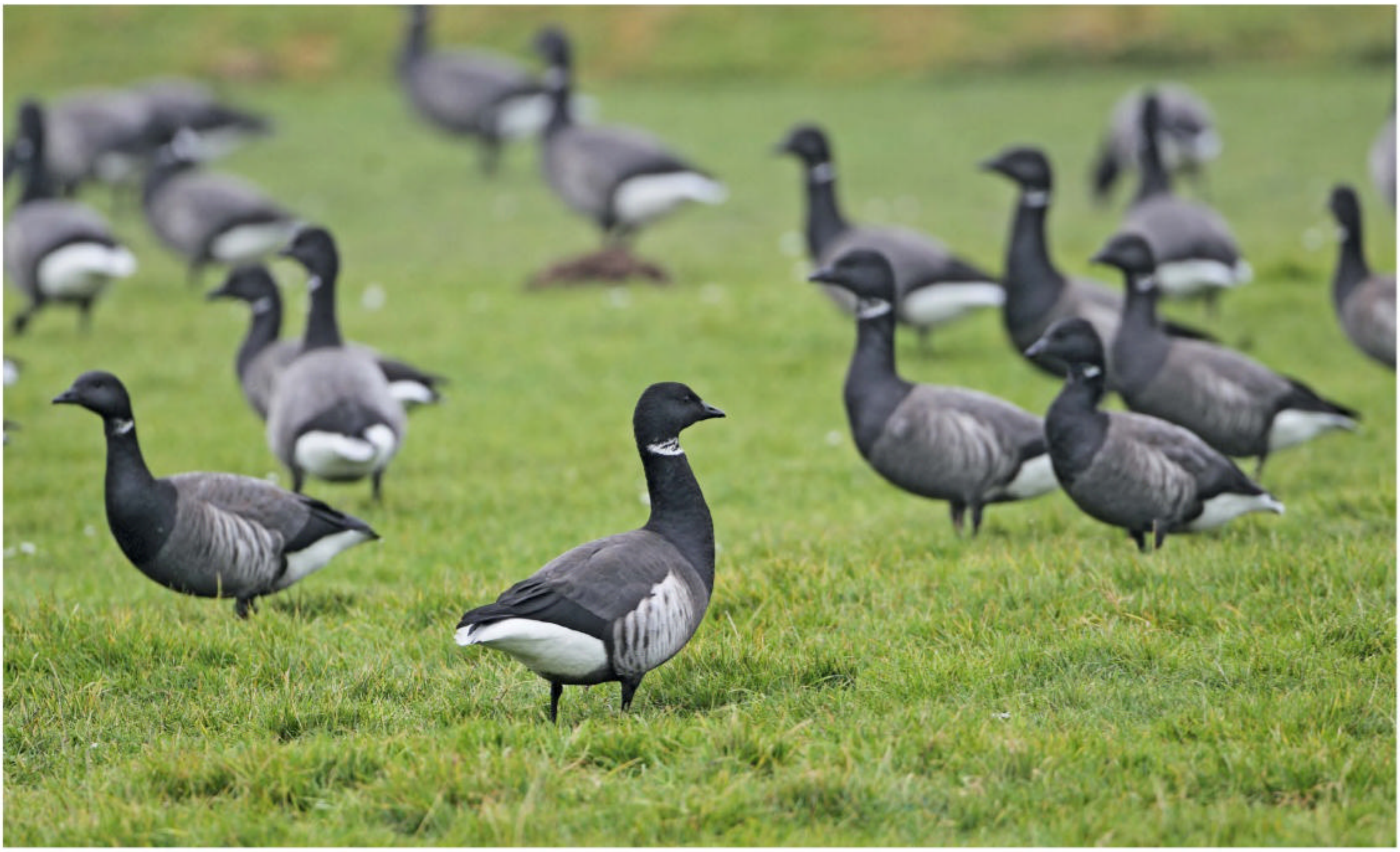


BILL SCHMOKER



NIALL KEOGH

ELEVEN: Adult Grey-bellied Brant (Dublin, Ireland, 13 November 2013). This bird shows a confusing mix of brown-toned upperparts and pale belly, but has a strong grey-brown wash across the breast-sides and upper belly and clear dark feathering between the legs, features never shown by Pale-bellied Brent. The neck collar is also conspicuously deep and bold, as in Black Brant. This strange combination of characters is, however, typical of the enigmatic form 'Grey-bellied Brant'. On its own, this would be a particularly hard bird to identify (most resembling a Dark-bellied x Pale-bellied hybrid), but its Irish location and Canadian Pale-bellied Brent 'carriers' give a clear indication that it has a High Arctic Canadian origin.

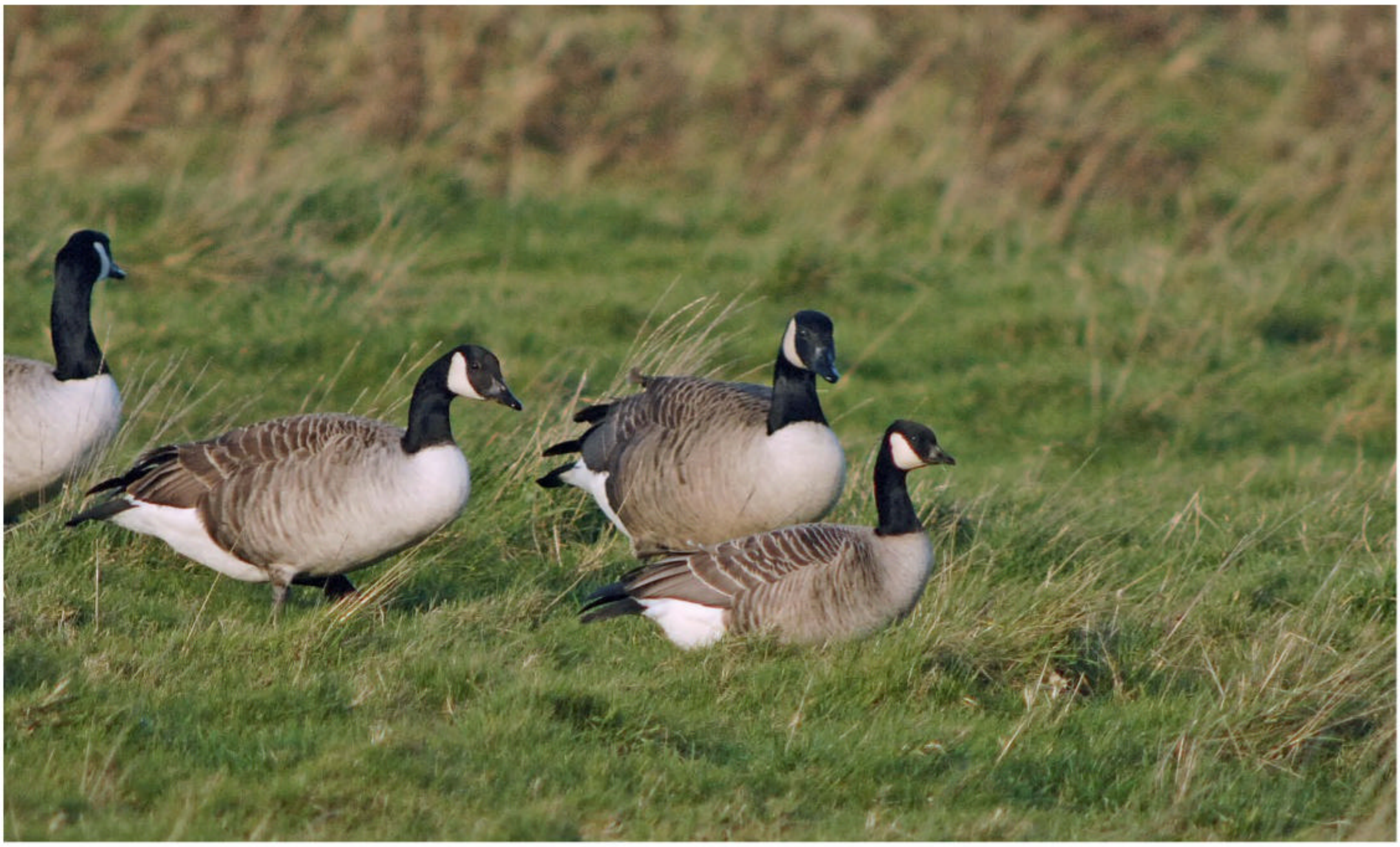


ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

TWELVE: Adult hybrid Black Brant × Dark-bellied Brent Goose (Wells, Norfolk, 22 November 2010). Hybrids occur relatively rarely between Brent Goose subspecies. The most regular combination, with several recorded annually among Dark-bellied Brent Geese in south-east England, is Black Brant × Dark-bellied Brent Goose. Although superficially resembling Black Brant with its large white flank patch and bold, deep collar, the earth-brown hues on this front bird are completely lacking, replaced by a grey 'glaze' to the upperparts and underparts. Hybrids can be subtle, however, shifting in appearance according to the light and closely resembling first one parent form and then the other.

# Canada and Cackling Geese

Words by Keith Vinicombe



JULIAN BHALERAO

ONE: Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (front right) with Canada Geese *B c canadensis* (Kelling, Norfolk, 26 December 2012). Due to their very small size, Cackling Geese are easily separated from feral canadensis Canada Geese, but identifying such birds to form is much more difficult. Wild Cackling Geese in Britain are most likely to be of the north-easterly subspecies *hutchinsii*, but escaped birds could be of any form and may be impossible to identify to subspecific level. This bird shows *hutchinsii*'s typically short and narrow bill, a steep forehead and a flat crown that peaks slightly at the rear, producing a distinctive square-headed appearance. Its plumage is not that dissimilar to canadensis, although some are darker.

There's far more to the familiar Canada Goose than the long-established feral population which is now so numerous in Britain. With the species recently split into two, the annual occurrence of wild individuals on the European side of the Atlantic clearly deserves our attention. Yet remarkably, neither the newly recognised Cackling Goose nor its vagrant Canada cousins have yet been admitted to the British Ornithological Union's British list. Keith Vinicombe unravels the complexities of identification and taxonomy.

# Basic Principles

In 2004, the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) split Canada Goose *Branta canadensis* into two species, based mainly on mtDNA evidence, their divergence having occurred approximately one million years ago (Mlodinow *et al* 2008). The large-bodied interior and southern North American breeding forms continued to be known as Canada Goose, while the small-bodied tundra breeding forms became Cackling Goose *B hutchinsii*.

A year later, the British Ornithologists' Union (BOU) followed suit, but decided to rename the two species 'Greater Canada Goose' and 'Lesser Canada Goose'. The problem with this is that the subspecies *parvipes*, traditionally known as Lesser Canada Goose, is treated under the new taxonomy as a form of Greater Canada Goose. As Canada Geese are native to North America, it was surely incumbent on the BOU to have deferred to the AOU's nomenclature. Since then, both *Birdwatch* and *British Birds* have adopted the American names Canada Goose and Cackling Goose, and thankfully the wider birding community appears to be following suit.

The identification of the various forms of the Canada Goose complex has always been controversial. It is easy to get bogged down with the sheer complexity of the subject, but the main advantage of the AOU's 2004 decision was that it simplified the matter considerably: it divided them into 'big geese and 'little geese', with the intermediate forms being lumped in with the larger taxa.

### Status in Britain

The form of Canada Goose that breeds so commonly in Britain is nominate *canadensis*, which was introduced in the 17th century. Wild Canada and Cackling Geese reach Britain and Ireland annually, the initial vagrancy apparently taking place in or around their Arctic breeding ranges. The birds then 'abmigrate' to Britain and Ireland with their carrier species: Pink-footed, Greenland White-fronted and Barnacle Geese. By far the most likely form to reach Britain is the highly migratory nominate Cackling Goose subspecies *B h hutchinsii*, sometimes known as Richardson's Cackling Goose, which breeds as far east as Baffin Island and the Ungava Peninsula in north-eastern Canada, and rarely also in western Greenland (Mlodinow *et al* 2008).

To the south of Richardson's are two larger forms of Canada Goose that have also been claimed in Britain. The first is Todd's Canada Goose *B c interior*, which breeds around Hudson and James Bays. Given that it has recently expanded its range into Greenland, it must be considered an increasingly likely vagrant. The second is Lesser Canada Goose *B c parvipes*, which breeds in boreal and sub-Arctic habitats from Hudson Bay west to Alaska.

Turning to the Cackling Geese, Modlinow *et al* 2008 recommend extreme caution in ascribing any given individual to a particular subspecies, so it must be accepted that not all can be identified to subspecific level. In flocks, they consider that only 90-95 per cent of birds viewed closely can be subspecifically identified with a high degree of confidence. A firm conclusion is far less likely with lone birds. They also warn against identifying birds from photographs. They estimate that the chances of identifying a lone, photographed bird may be as low as 10-20 per cent.

There is broad overlap in plumage features among the taxa, underpart coloration being highly variable within each form. Immatures of all subspecies average paler than adults, but perceived coloration is highly subjective, even under ideal conditions with birds of known subspecies present.

To complicate things further, whereas adults have only one complete moult in late summer, juveniles have a post-juvenile body moult from autumn onwards. Accurate subspecific identification in the field must also rely heavily on size and structure, but this can vary dramatically with changing posture, activity and distance. It should also be borne in mind that apparent size may be unreliable simply because all taxa show some degree of sexual dimorphism, males being larger than females. Remarkably, adult size is also significantly affected by the birds' diet as goslings (Modlinow *et al* 2008).

In Britain, the bottom line with vagrant Cackling Geese is not to try too hard to ascribe them to form. Having said that, birds accompanying Greenland Barnacle Geese and Pink-footed Geese should be wild and are most likely to be *hutchinsii*, but those seen elsewhere or with other goose species could be escapes or possibly vagrants of any form. Therefore, it may not be worth spending too much effort deciding which taxon may be involved.

### Lone vagrants

Most Cackling Goose records in Britain are of birds associating with appropriate carrier species, particularly Barnacle and Pink-footed Geese. But what of lone birds turning up elsewhere? Such records are invariably dismissed as escapes, but are we right to maintain this negative attitude?

In the late autumn and winter of 2011-12, following a remarkable season locally for American waders, three separate Cackling Geese (all apparently *hutchinsii*) were recorded on or around the Severn Estuary, and all disappeared in March or April. We usually assume that Cackling Geese only turn up with appropriate carrier species, but why can't single birds make it? Lone American Wigeon, another gregarious species, routinely cross the Atlantic.

Mlodinow *et al* 2008 (quoting unpublished data from Malcolm Ogilvie) state that in Britain there are about 60 Richardson's Cackling Geese in captivity, compared with approximately 200 *minima*, yet the British records of *hutchinsii* greatly outnumber those of *minima*. This fact alone would suggest that most of the Richardson's seen in Europe are indeed wild.

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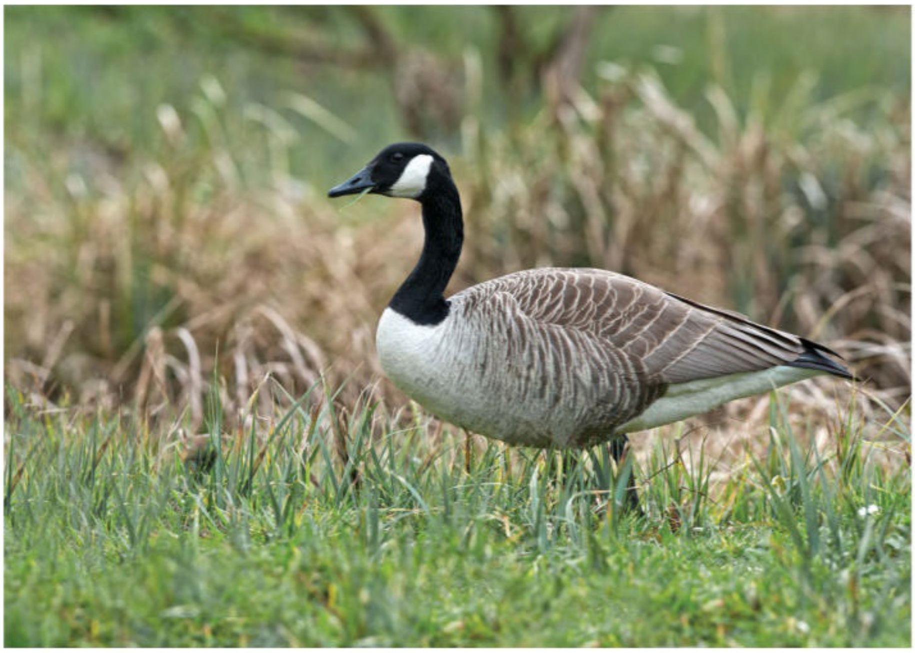
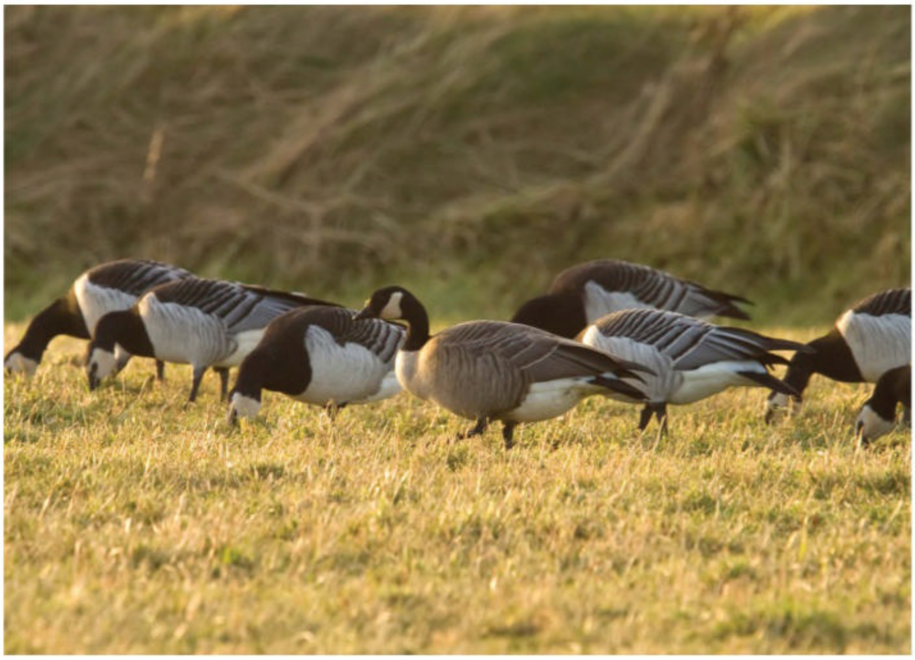
TWO: Canada Goose *B c canadensis* (Arundel WWT, West Sussex, 17 April 2013). The nominate form of Canada Goose was introduced into Britain in the 17th century and is now a common and familiar part of our avifauna. However, it is not universally appreciated and attempts have been made to control its numbers. For example, at Chew Valley Lake, Somerset, the species was increasing exponentially until, following complaints from local farmers, a campaign of egg pricking significantly reduced its numbers, both as a resident and as a moulting species. The colonisation of their main breeding island by Foxes no doubt also accelerated the decline.



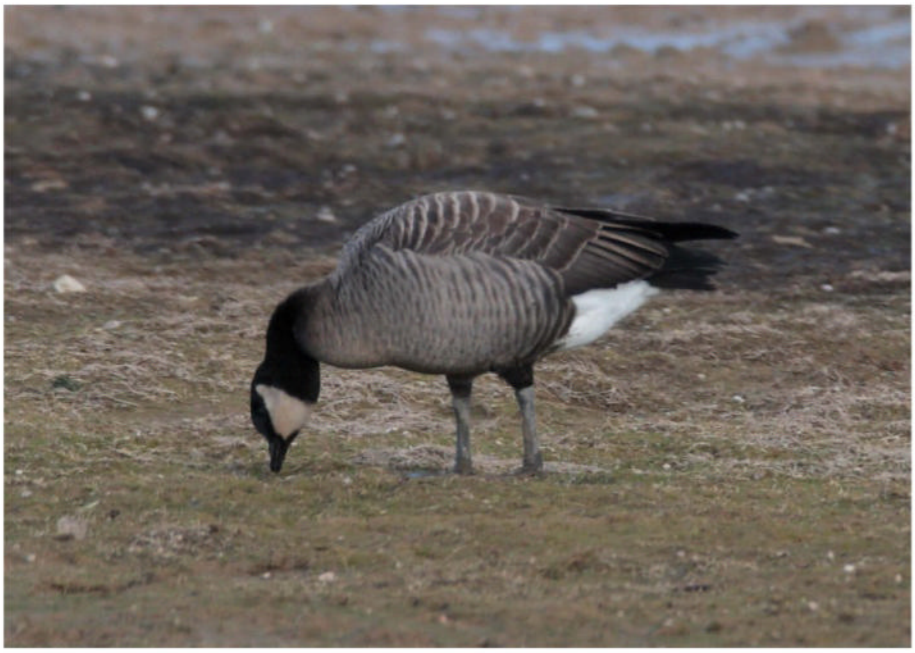
LISA GEOGHEGAN

THREE: Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (Ballyconnell, Co Sligo, 13 December 2010). Although identified as Richardson's Cackling Goose, this bird's identity is not immediately apparent from this photograph (compare it with photo seven). It seems to be similar in size to the accompanying Barnacle Geese, but it is difficult to be sure. In addition, its head feathers are somewhat flattened, rendering an evaluation of its head shape difficult. The bill seems slightly on the long side, but this may be partly due to feather sleeking exaggerating bill length. This shot confirms an important point made by Mlodinow *et al* (2008): identifying lone Cackling Geese from photographs can be problematic.

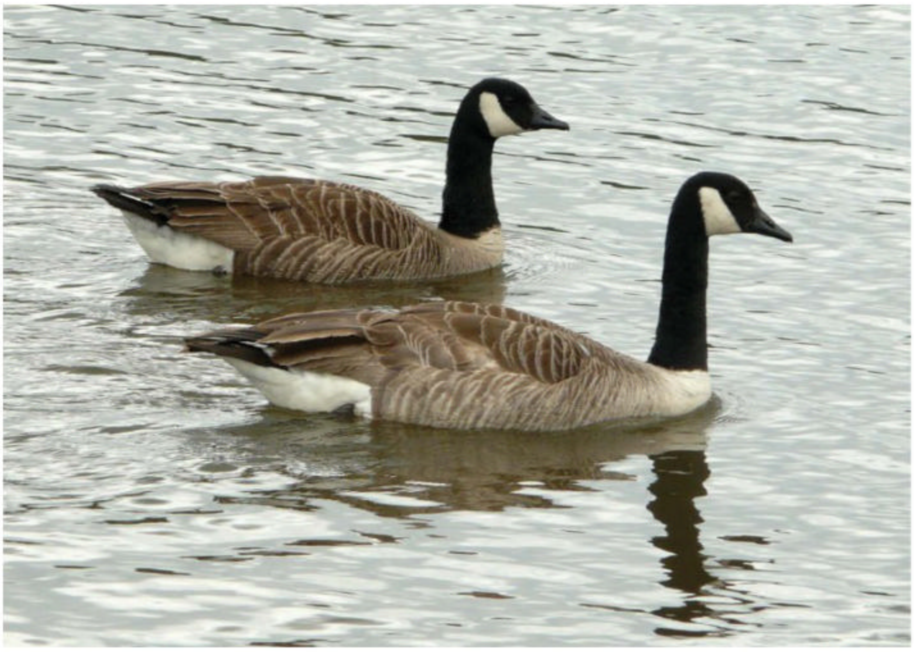


MICHAEL CASEY

FOUR: Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (Blagdon Lake, Somerset, 1 November 2011). This bird is largely in juvenile plumage, although it has already started its post-juvenile body moult into first-winter plumage. Most of the scapular feathers are new square first-winter feathers (contrastingly fringed whitish-buff) with a minority of more rounded, browner juvenile feathers. Note that the underparts are quite dark and the bird also showed a slight purplish sheen to its breast. By April it had completed its post-juvenile body moult and, interestingly, its overall plumage tone was then distinctly paler.

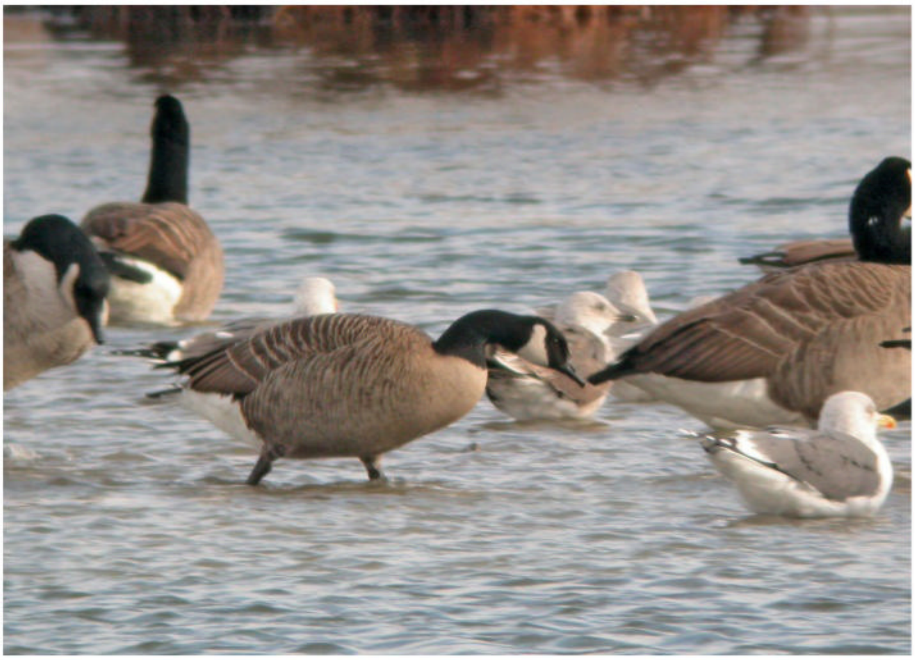


NIGEL MILBOURNE



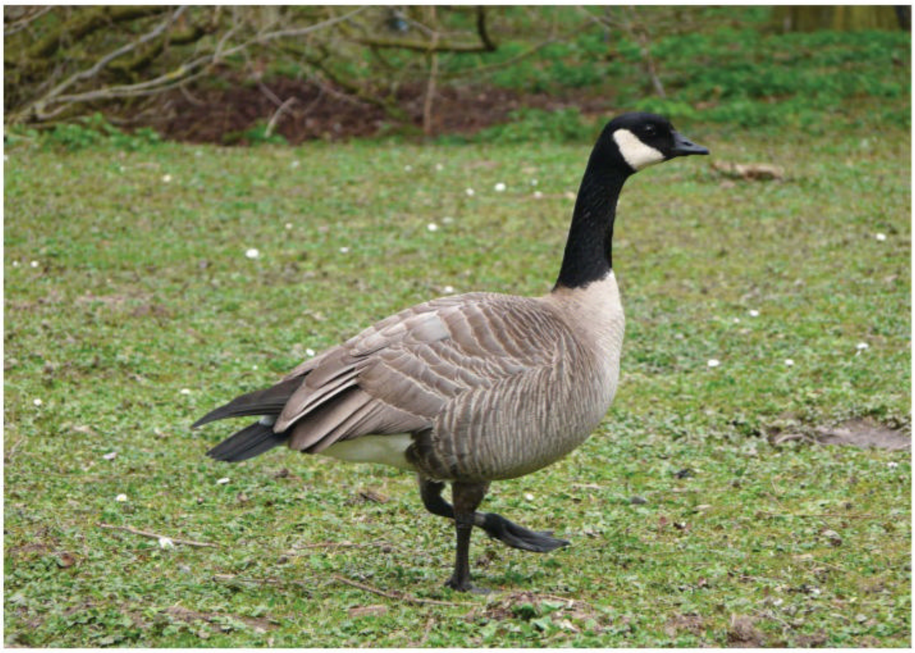
KEITH VINICOMBE

FIVE: Possible Todd's Canada Goose *B c interior* (rear bird) with Canada Goose *B c canadensis* (Chew Valley Lake, Somerset, 24 June 2013). The form *interior* breeds in north-eastern Canada, immediately to the south of Richardson's Cackling Goose. It is similar to the accompanying nominate Canada Goose but is slightly smaller and darker, as well as noticeably browner on the breast; as such it would appear to fit the criteria for this taxon. Remarkably, it was one of three such birds present in 2013 in the moulting Canada Goose flock. Given that these moulting birds originate from a large swathe of south-west England, are we right to maintain a rigidly negative view of such records?



TIM BALL

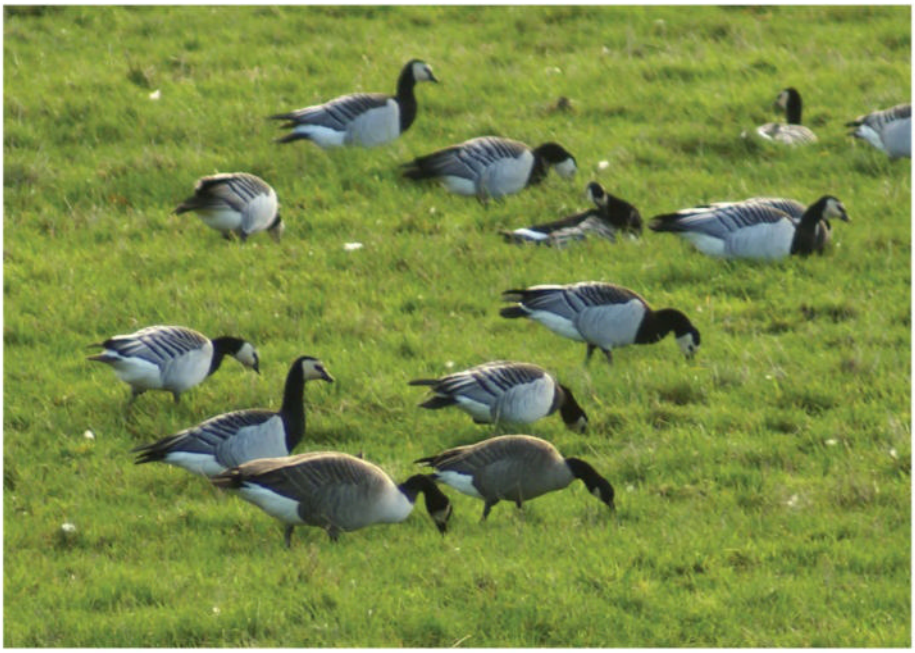
SIX: Possible Lesser Canada Goose *B c parvipes* (Lower Farm, Berkshire, December 2007). Lesser Canada Goose is intermediate in size between nominate Canada and Cackling Geese, and similar in size to Greater White-fronted Goose. Structurally, it has a longer and more slender neck than any of the Cackling forms, and this shows a distinct loop as it feeds. Its head shape is highly variable; many are similar to a more delicate nominate Canada, but some (particularly east of the Rockies) have a short, steep forehead more like Cackling Goose, with a sloping crown and a rounded rear crown. Most are quite white breasted (but some are darker) and the white face patch typically narrows towards the top.



KEITH VINICOMBE

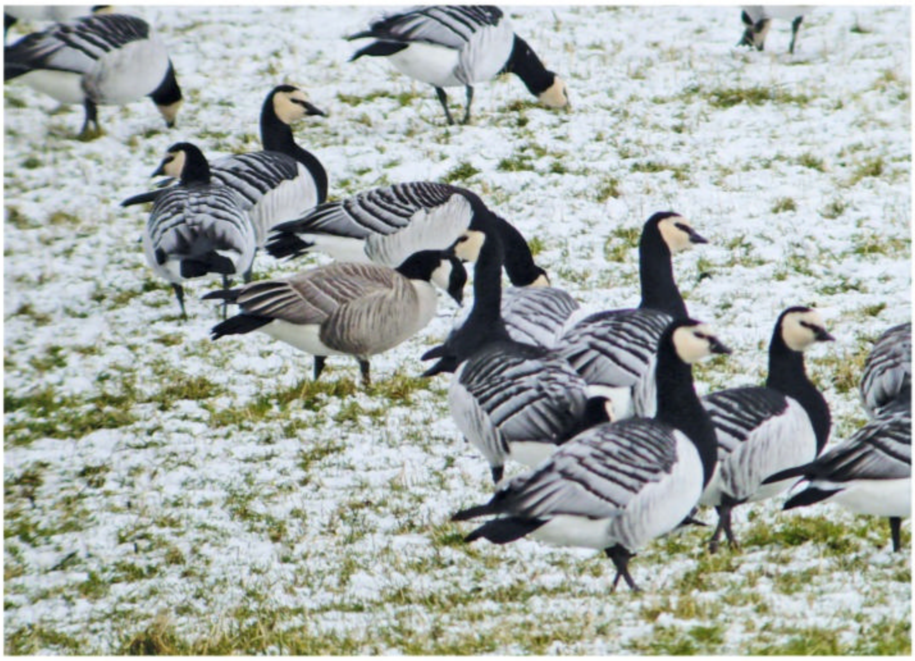
SEVEN: Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (Slimbridge WWT, Gloucestershire, March 2012; captive bird). The uniformly patterned plumage of this adult bird is paler than that of the Blagdon Lake bird shown in image four, this paleness being a feature quite typical of *hutchinsii*. The breast in particular is distinctly pale and, although it shows a narrow white neck-ring, this is shorter than that of the Blagdon bird, and owing to its lack of contrast with the paler breast, is less conspicuous. Its head is less square, but this is simply due to feather sleeking prompted by anxiety at the approach of the photographer.

EIGHT: Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (right) with Canada Goose *B c canadensis* (left) (Lissadell, Co Sligo, 31 October 2009). These two geese are very different in size, the left-hand bird being distinctly larger with more of a loop in its neck when feeding. Its identity is not immediately apparent, although in the field it was apparently identified as a *canadensis* Canada Goose; its plumage certainly fits that form. The smaller goose is similar in size to the accompanying Barnacle Geese and was identified as a *hutchinsii* Cackling Goose. Its short neck and rather dark body plumage, particularly on its breast, support this identification, and it is just about possible to make out its rather square head.



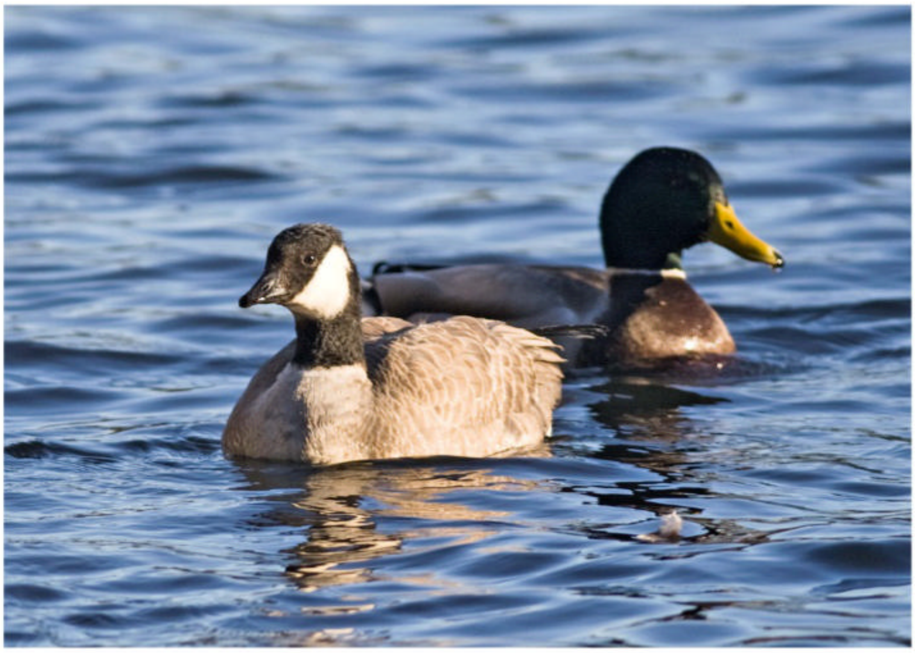
JOE GERATY

NINE: Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (Islay, Argyll, 20 December 2009). Wild Cackling Geese occurring in Britain are most likely to arrive with carrier species that breed in the same general area, the initial vagrancy occurring near or even on their breeding grounds, and subsequently abmigrating with them to Europe. The bird in this photograph appears to be a fairly typical hutchinsii. It is similar in size to the accompanying Barnacle Geese, but its plumage – rather pale with a whitish breast – is not dissimilar to that of *canadensis* Canada Goose. Also significant is its steep forehead and rather square head shape, good characters for this particular form.

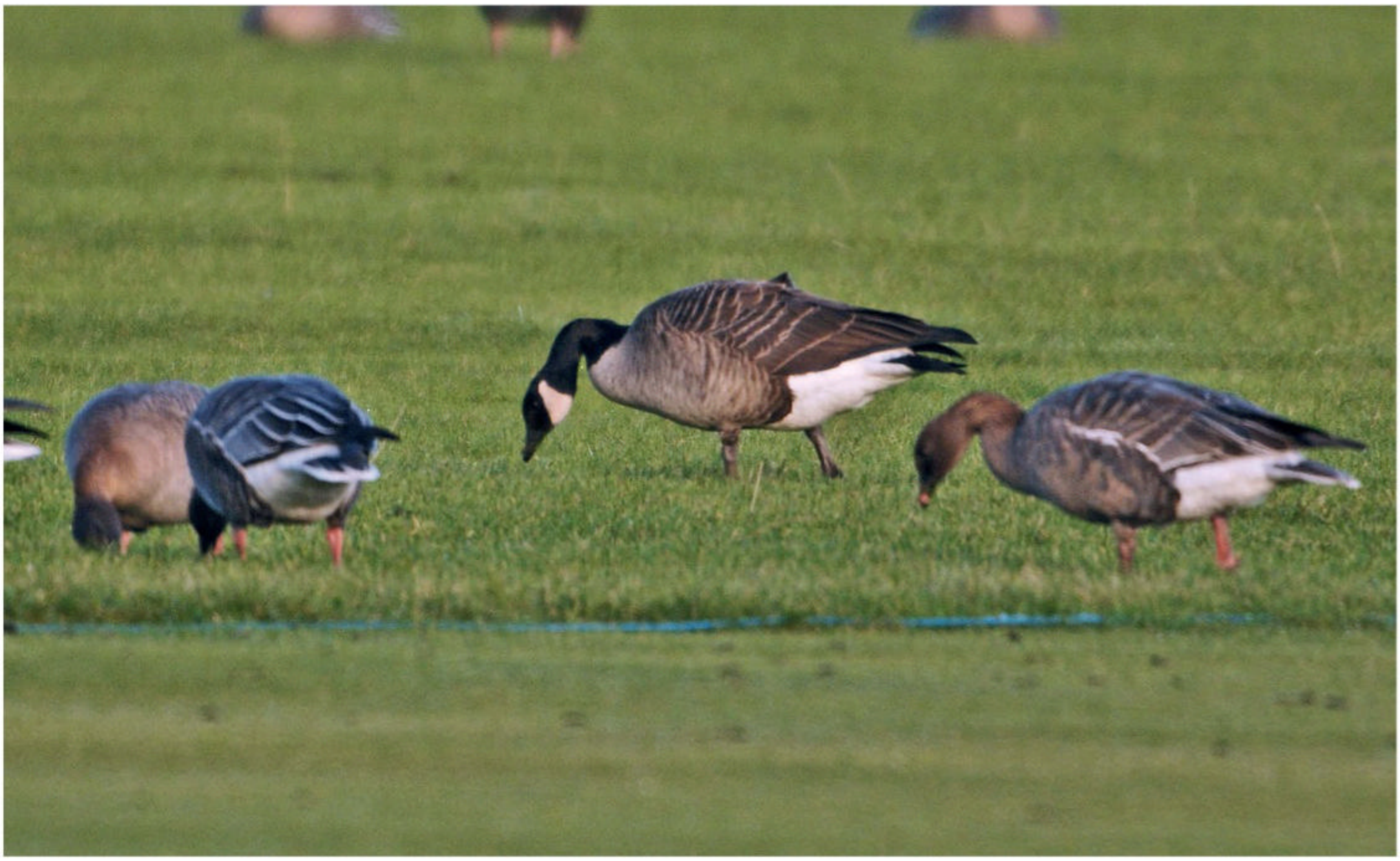


RICHARD BONSER

TEN: Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (Connecticut, USA, 11 December 2006). This photograph shows the size of Richardson's Cackling Goose in comparison with a drake Mallard – it really is a small bird! It also shows the rather unremarkable plumage (similar to that of the familiar *canadensis* Canada Goose), but note its small bill, rather square-looking head and the narrow white neck-ring.

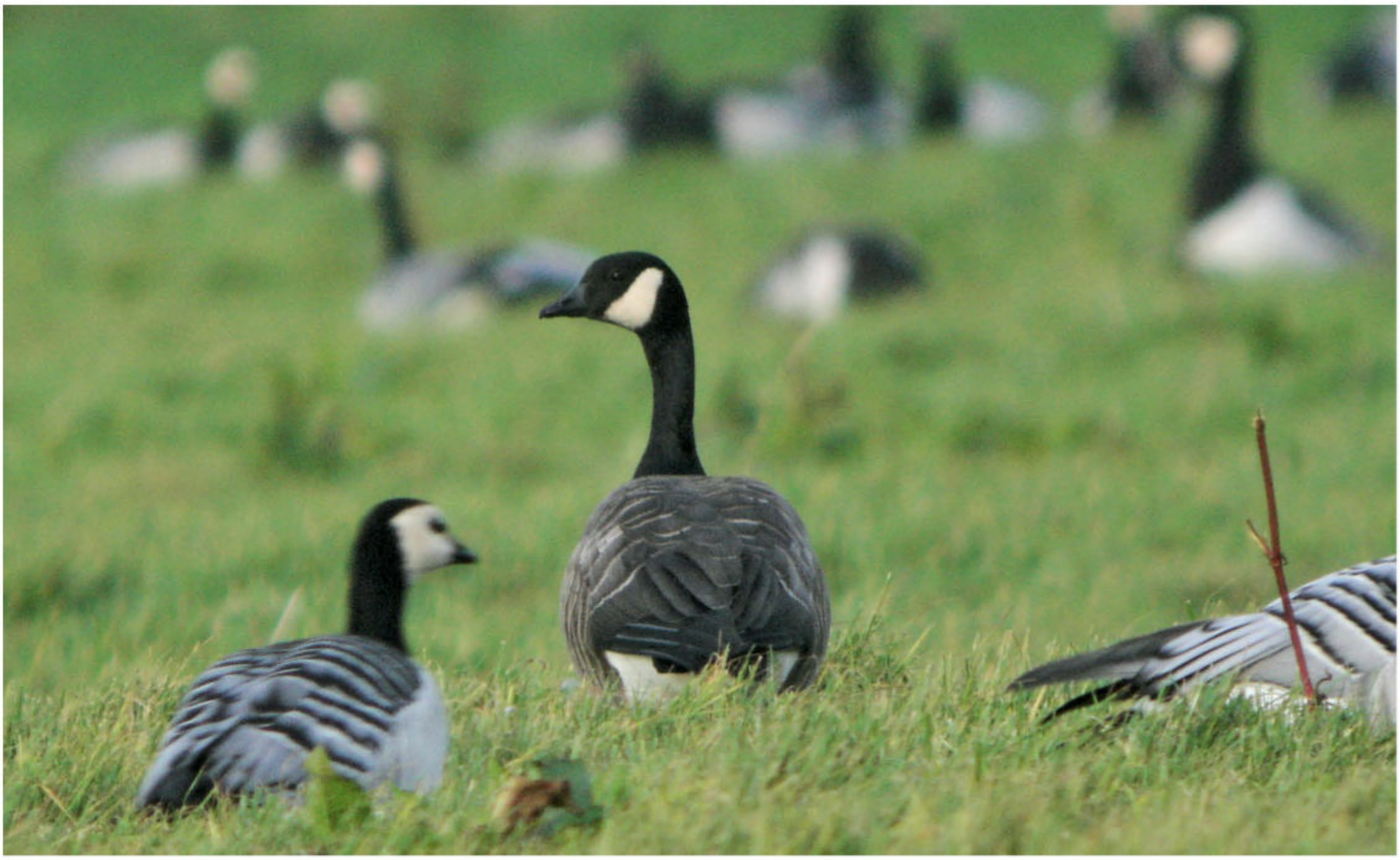


JULIAN HOUGH



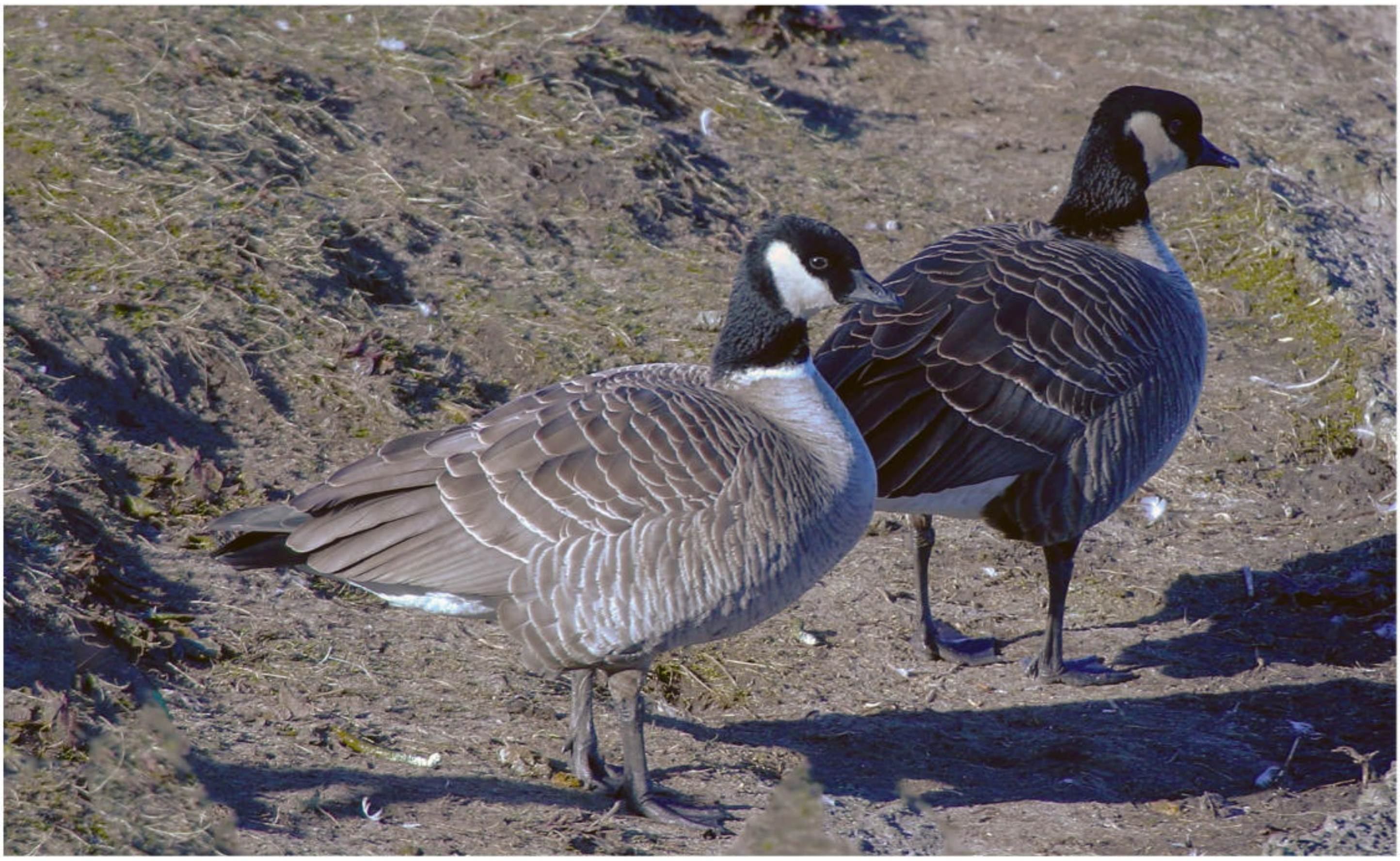
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

ELEVEN: Possible Todd's Canada Goose *B c interior* (Little Crosby, Lancashire, 27 December 2005). Given that this bird is associating with Pink-footed Geese, it would have to be a serious contender as a genuinely wild vagrant. Todd's Canada Geese breed in the sub-Arctic zone to the south and east of Hudson Bay and in recent years have spread into Greenland. As a consequence, occasional individuals are likely to tag onto flocks of Europe-bound Pink-feet. This is a large Canada Goose, not much smaller than nominate *canadensis*. As this photograph shows, it is somewhat darker and browner than our familiar introduced bird.



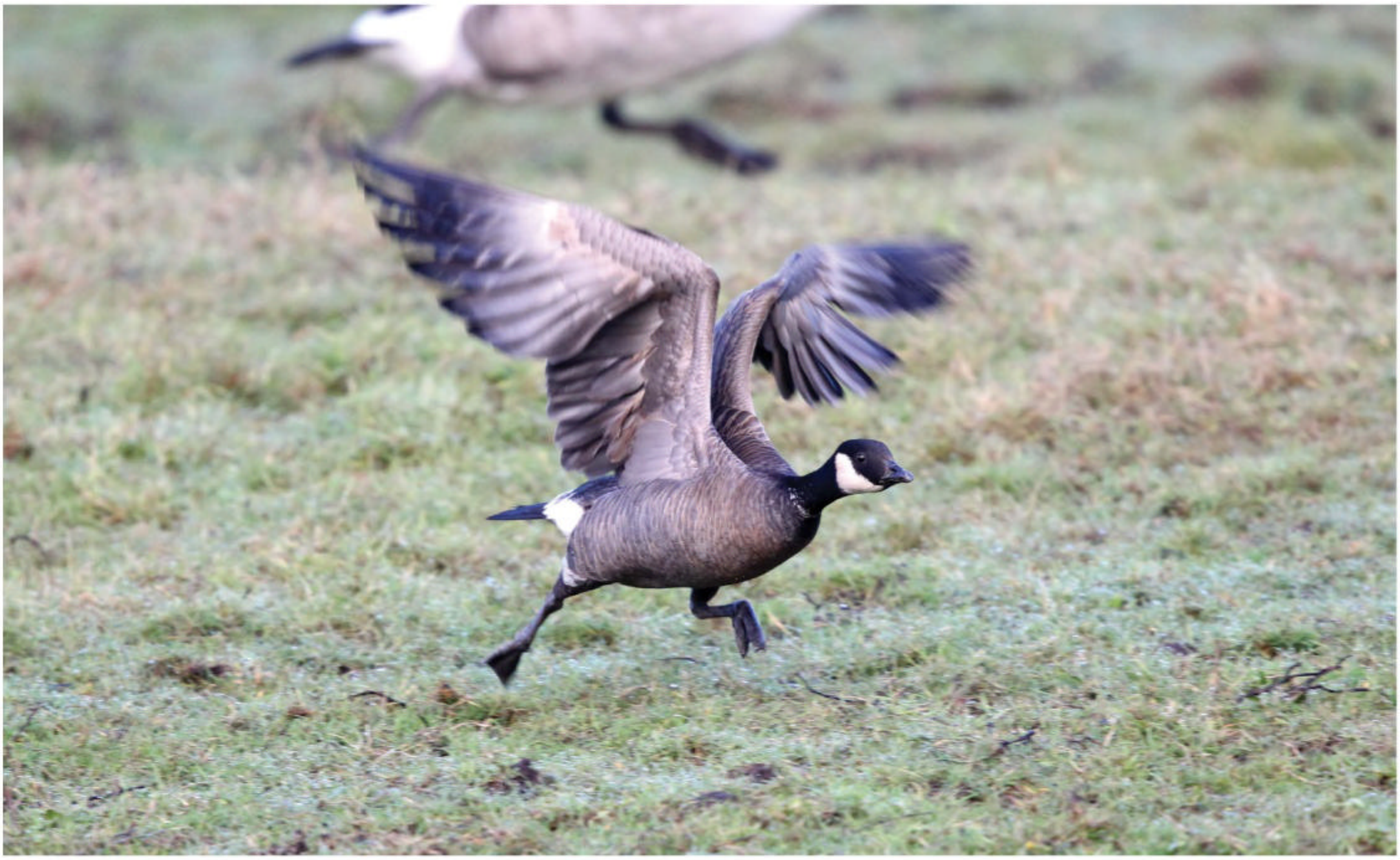
TRISTAN REID

TWELVE: Possible Taverner's Cackling Goose *B h taverneri* (Mersehead, Dumfries and Galloway, 25 November 2007). This bird was identified as Taverner's Cackling Goose, a form that breeds almost entirely in Alaska. According to Sibley (2000), it may intergrade with Lesser Canada Goose *B c parvipes* in central Alaska, but Mlodinow *et al* (2008) would appear to contradict this. It is similar to both Aleutian Cackling Goose *B h leucopareia* and Lesser Canada Goose *B c parvipes*, but its breast is slightly darker. Given its western breeding range, this would seem a highly unlikely vagrant here and its field identification on this side of the Atlantic would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to prove. Escapes are unlikely as it is apparently unknown here in captivity.



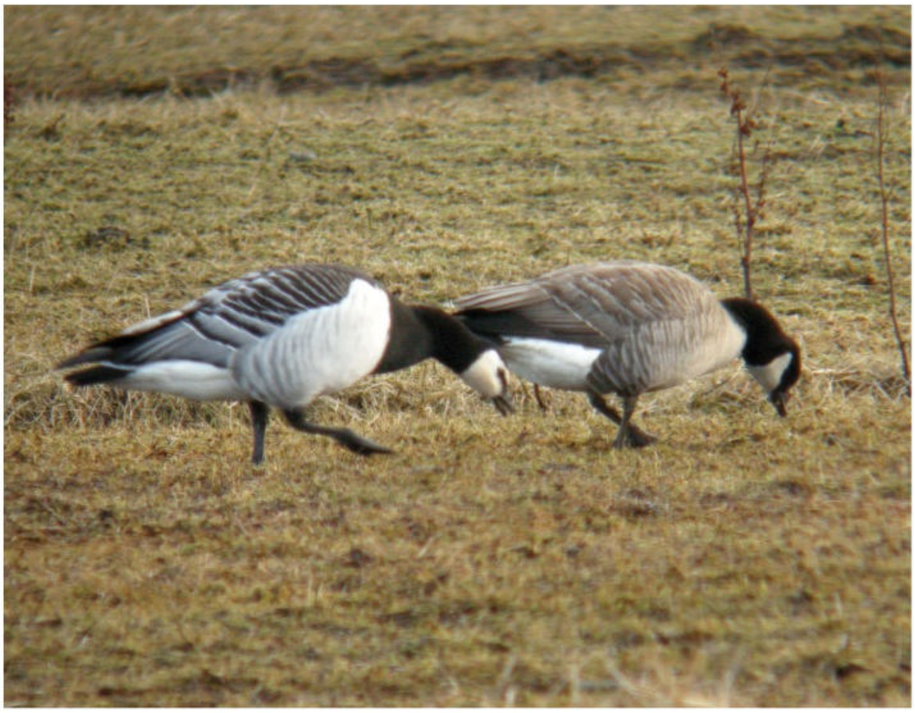
JOHN CARTER

THIRTEEN: Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (Caerlaverock WWT, Dumfries and Galloway, 26 February 2004). Again, note the small bill, short neck and square head. As this photograph shows, some nominate Cackling individuals have a fairly prominent white neck-ring, while others lack it altogether. There is also variation in the underpart colour, although paler birds are more usual.



ANDREW MOON

FOURTEEN: Probable Ridgway's Cackling Goose *B h minima* (Stocker's Farm, Hertfordshire, 17 December 2013). The form minima was the one originally known as 'Cackling Goose', the name now adopted for the entire species. It has a very limited breeding range in western Alaska and, given that fact, unless birds somehow find their way across the Arctic it must surely be regarded as a very unlikely vagrant to Britain. It is the smallest of the Cackling Geese, with a small bill, a short neck and a dark brown breast with a purplish sheen.


STEVE PERCIVAL

FIFTEEN: Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (Islay, Argyll, 14 February 2010). This photograph shows the relative size of *hutchinsii* Cackling Goose compared with the Barnacle Goose to its right. This bird is in fact slightly smaller than the Barnacle, but this may be related to its sex – like all geese, females average smaller than males. Even though the bird is feeding and is slightly turned away from the camera, it is still possible to make out the short bill, the rather square head and the short neck. Cackling Goose calls are a high-pitched yelping, distinctly different from the familiar trumpeting of *canadensis* Canada Geese.

# Find your own Canada and Cackling Geese

The presence of so many feral Canada Geese and occasional escaped Cackling Geese in Britain and Ireland compound the difficulties of finding wild individuals of these two species. For such geese to stand a chance of being genuine vagrants, the western coasts in late autumn and early winter are best.

However, by now potential 'carrier species' will have settled down on the east coast, too, and it may be best not to dismiss the odd Cackling Goose that turns up in Norfolk or Northumberland in winter. With neither species yet accepted into Category A by the BOURC, any apparent vagrancy pattern is inevitably hearsay, but enough potentially wild birds have been found now to indicate likely areas worth searching.

Both the Irish Rare Birds Committee and the Northern Ireland Birdwatchers' Association Records Committee have accepted Cackling and Canada Geese to Category A, and Ireland is arguably the best region to see them. The flocks of Barnacle Geese at Lissadell, Co Sligo (G 6344), often seem to produce Richardson's Cackling Goose, while Balygilgan NR (G 6443) and Raghly (G 5741) in the same county have also been known to turn up a bird. Doonbeg, Co Clare (Q 9665), is also worth checking, but it follows that any flock of Barnacle Geese is worth scoping to see what's present.

Any lone Canada Goose in the west of Ireland may also be worth a look, particularly if mixed with Barnacle Geese or Greenland White-fronted Geese, as the feral Canada population doesn't wander much to those parts.

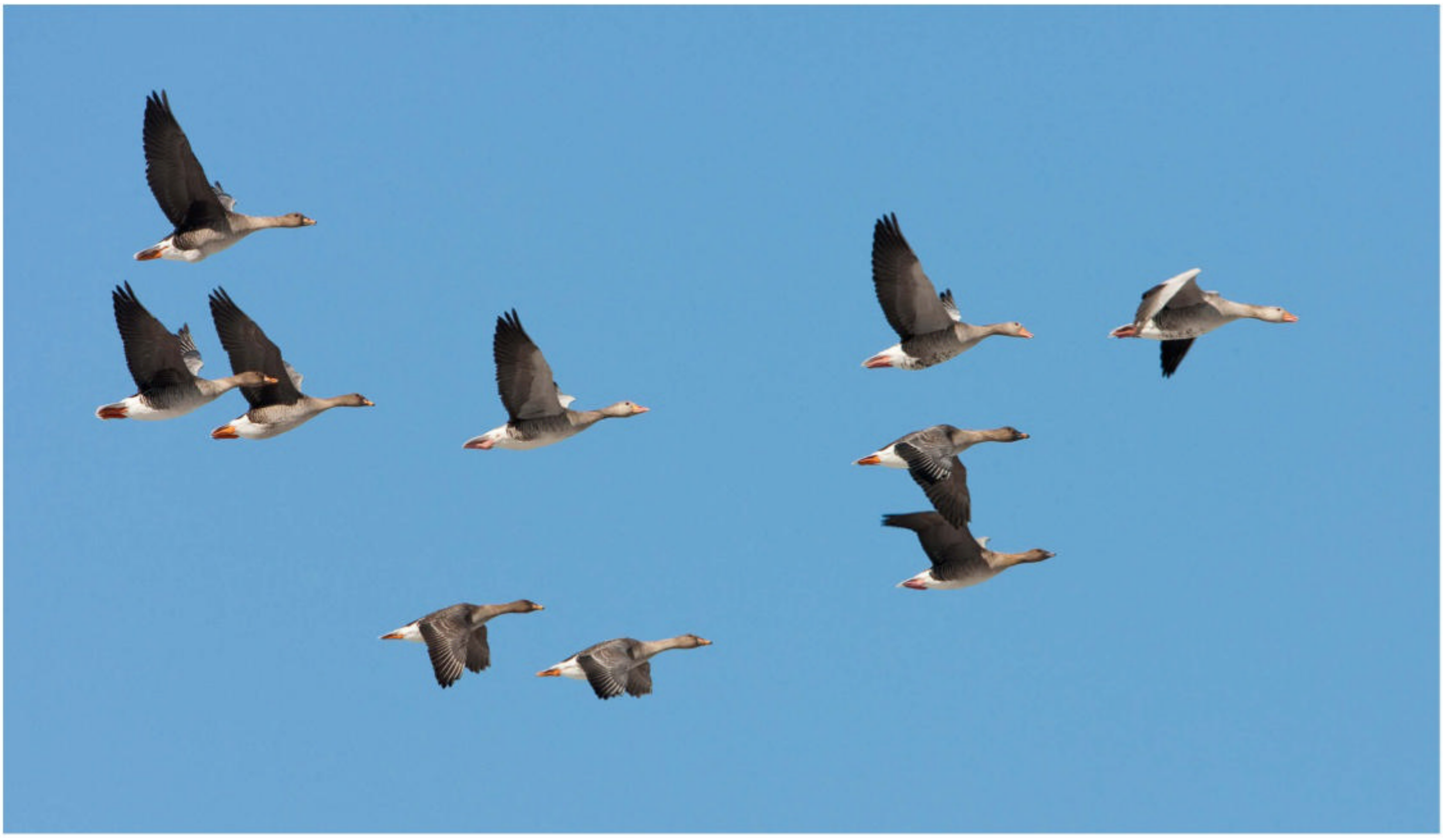
North-west Scotland holds plenty of wintering Barnacle and Greenland White-fronted Geese, and there is no reason to think that Cackling Geese found among them are more or less valid than the Irish birds. Loch Gruinart RSPB, Islay, Argyll (NR 2767), is a good shout, as is Caerlaverock WWT, Dumfries and Galloway (NY 0365), which has a proven track record for rare wildlfowl.

On the east coast of Britain, it is Pink-footed Geese that are suspected of being the carriers of Cackling Geese, and the prime wintering areas for this species are the Northumberland and Yorkshire coasts and north Norfolk. In the last county, search the 'Pink-foot' flocks at Cley Marshes NWT (TG 0544), Holkham Freshmarsh (TF 8844), or anywhere else in this goose-rich region and see what you turn up. In Northumberland, East Chevington NWT (NZ 2698) and Budle Bay (NU 1536) have both turned up Richardson's Cackling Geese in the recent past.

If you find a bird on its own or away from the hot-spots in Britain and Ireland, though, you'll have to assess the likelihood of it being wild yourself – don't expect the committees to accept it any time soon.

# Pink-footed, Tundra Bean and Taiga Bean Geese

Words by Andy Stoddart



JARI PELTOMÄKI (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

ONE: Greylag, Taiga Bean and Pink-footed Geese (Pyhajoki, Finland, 20 April 2008). This instructive shot shows six Taiga Bean Geese alongside two Greylag Geese (top centre and right) and a single Pink-footed Goose (lower right). Though large, approaching the Greylags in size, the bean geese lack the heavy body, broad wings and heavy head and bill of the Greylags and also lack that species' pale plumage hues, particularly its striking pale grey forewings. Instead they appear more elegantly proportioned, darker and have a relatively dark forewing. Note the short neck, small head and short pink bill of the Pink-footed Goose.

Winter is the season to take in Britain's spectacular goose movements and flocks, and they are worth the trip to one of their regular haunts. However, prolonged observation of these gatherings – particularly flocks of Pink-footed Geese – may reveal the odd bird that is similar but subtly different. These could well be one of the scarce but annual bean geese, both species of which winter in Britain in small numbers. With Andy Stoddart's guide to their diagnostic details, you should be able to decide exactly which one you're looking at while still enjoying the breathtaking spectacle.

# Basic Principles

No birds are more emblematic of grey winter days than three of our grey geese – Pink-footed, Taiga Bean and Tundra Bean Geese. Once all regarded as forms of the same species, Pink-footed Goose has long been 'split'; *Birdwatch* follows the IOC in splitting the two bean geese, though some authorities still lump them.

The three taxa are quite distinct, however, not just in their size, structure and plumage but also in their distribution. Like all geese, they are highly traditional in their breeding and wintering grounds and migration routes, and have predictable vagrancy patterns, so the key to finding them is informed expectation.

Ageing grey geese is not always easy, but on adults the whitish tips to the upperparts feathers are quite straight, typically aligned in neat rows. On juveniles these same feather tips are more rounded, forming a more jumbled, disrupted pattern.

### Pink-footed Goose

This species breeds mainly in Iceland and east Greenland and winters in traditional areas in Scotland, north-west England and Norfolk. The first birds arrive early, in the first week of September, with peak numbers reached by December, but birds start to drift north from their Norfolk wintering areas in late January. Another, smaller, population breeds on Svalbard and winters in continental north-west Europe.

Though migrant flocks may be seen flying overhead anywhere in northern England, the best chance to see this species well on the ground is to visit a main wintering site. Here the experience can be almost overwhelming, a truly spectacular show which must rank among this country's greatest wildlife spectacles. Here, as well as the thrill of seeing birds in numbers, it is also possible to study this delightful species at close range.

This is by far the smallest and daintiest of our grey geese. It is dumpy, short necked, round headed and short billed. Pink-foot is pale brown in colour, but with an often strong pale grey 'glaze' to the upperparts and a darker brown head and neck which contrast with a paler breast. It is, however, something of a chameleon, changing its hues according to the light, sometimes more brown, sometimes greyer. Its legs and feet are, of course, pink (though very exceptionally they may be orange), while its bill is dark with a variable pink band towards the tip.

In flight it looks short necked, with a contrasting dark head and neck and a strong pale grey forewing (though not as flashingly pale as that on a Greylag). The tail is broadly tipped with white. The calls are highly distinctive: a high-pitched *wink wink* interspersed with deeper notes. Lone birds can be particularly noisy, but the sound of thousands of birds rising together is not one to be forgotten.

### Taiga Bean Goose

This species breeds in the forest bog zone of northern Scandinavia and Russia. In Britain it has only two wintering areas: between Cumbernauld and Falkirk in southern Scotland (where it arrives in September) and on the Yare Marshes in Norfolk (where November arrivals are the norm). Though reliably found at both these sites, this is a rare bird elsewhere, not prone to turning up in flocks of other geese. Away from its twin wintering sites this is a significant find and doubtless a 'description species' in most counties.

Particularly in comparison with Pink-footed Goose, this is a large goose indeed, verging on Greylag in size but much more elegant and swan-like. It is structurally striking: large bodied, with a long slim neck, long small head and noticeably long bill.

On the ground it appears darker than Pink-footed Goose, more brown than grey with (on adults) frosty white fringes to the upperpart feathers. The legs and feet are orange, though the precise colour can be surprisingly difficult to make out at range on a grey winter day. The bill is variably marked dark and orange, many having extensive orange but others having a more restricted orange band near the tip.

In flight this is a large, powerful goose, long-necked and lacking the striking pale grey forewing of Pink-footed Goose. Instead, the whole upperwing is rather dark and uniform though the changing hues on a flying bird can be difficult to interpret. The white tip to the tail is narrow. The calls are deeper than those of Pink-footed Goose – a low *ung ung*.

### Tundra Bean Goose

This is the northern tundra-breeding counterpart of Taiga Bean Goose. It breeds in Siberia and winters in Continental north-west Europe. There are no long-standing, traditional wintering sites in Britain and birds reach us only as wanderers from the Continental wintering population, either as lone individuals, family parties or small flocks. At such times they may be found on their own or, perhaps more likely, among Pink-footed Geese, where finding them can be a challenge.

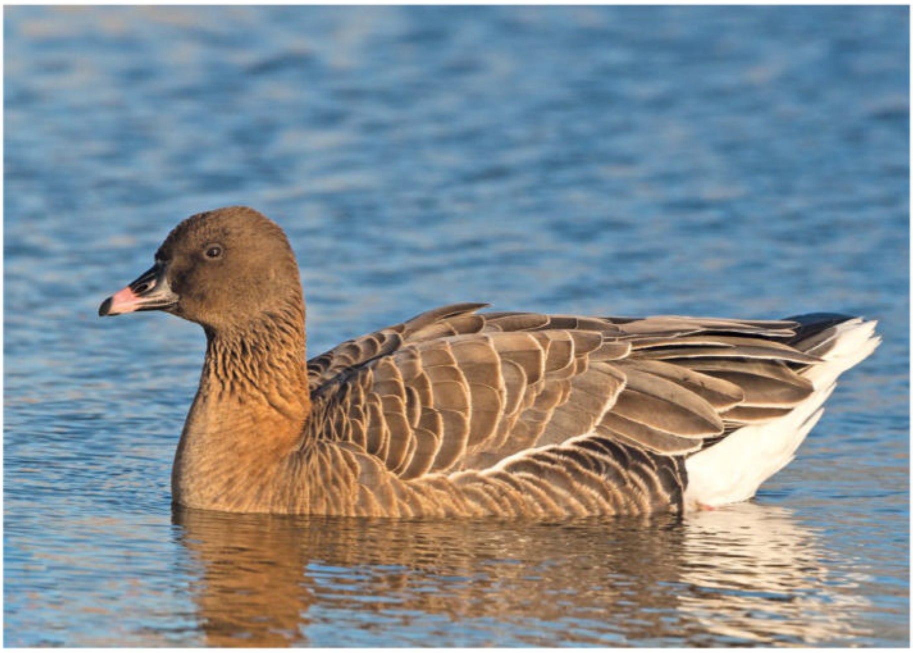
As might be expected, this species is only regularly recorded in East Anglia and the South-East. Elsewhere it is a rare bird. Numbers vary dramatically, however. In some years very few are recorded while other years see mini-influxes, usually the result of hard weather on the Continent. The largest numbers are often recorded in mid or late winter.

This species is smaller than Taiga Bean Goose and only a little larger than Pink-footed, so will not always stand out on size alone. Structural clues are much more important: long legs, a large, heavy, wedge-shaped head and a heavy, deep-based and wedge-shaped (though not especially long) bill with, on close views, a pronounced 'grinning patch'.

The plumage resembles Taiga Bean – dark brown with (on adults) white 'frosting' above and no grey 'glaze' to the upperparts. The legs and feet are orange and the bill is predominantly dark with a somewhat variable band of orange towards the tip.

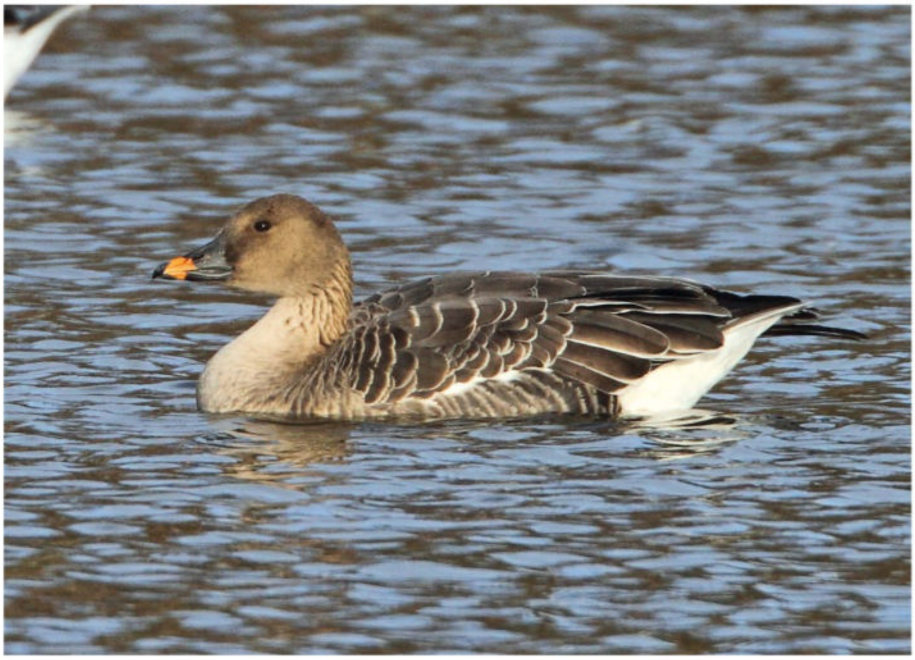
In flight Tundra Bean Geese look dark with, as in Taiga Bean, a rather uniform, darkish upperwing and a narrow white tail tip. The calls are similar to those of Taiga Bean and therefore deeper than Pink-footed Goose.

TWO: Adult Pink-footed Goose (Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, 17 February 2012). This is a classic portrait of an adult Pink-footed Goose. Although a grey goose, it appears small, compact and rather dumpy. Its neck is short and thick, its head is small and neatly rounded and its bill is short and relatively weak. Just a tiny hint of a pink leg can be seen here, but the bill shows extensive obvious pink.



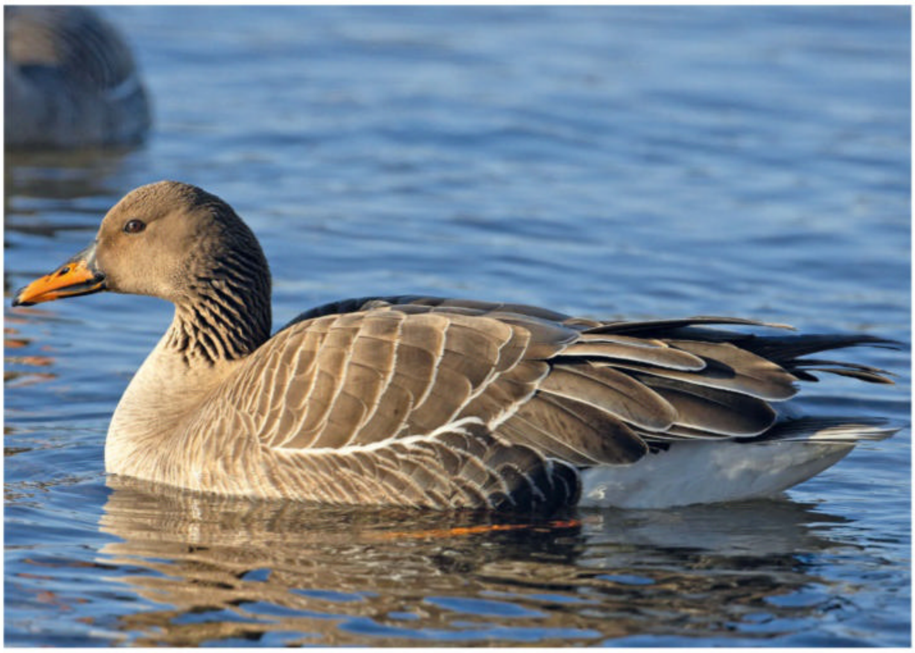
PETER HERING (WWW.BIRDIMAGENCY.COM)

THREE: Adult Tundra Bean Goose (Priorslee Flash, Shropshire, 5 December 2011). This swimming Tundra Bean Goose lacks the somewhat demure appearance of Pink-footed Goose. This is a much more solid and heavy bird. Its body looks bulky but it is the heavy, rather angular head which really catches the eye, an effect heightened by a heavy, deep-based and rather triangular bill, with a pronounced 'grinning patch'. The upperparts lack the subtle grey hues found on Pink-foot, being a colder, darker brown with more clearly defined crisp white feather fringes. The bill is mainly dark, but has a well-marked bright orange patch.

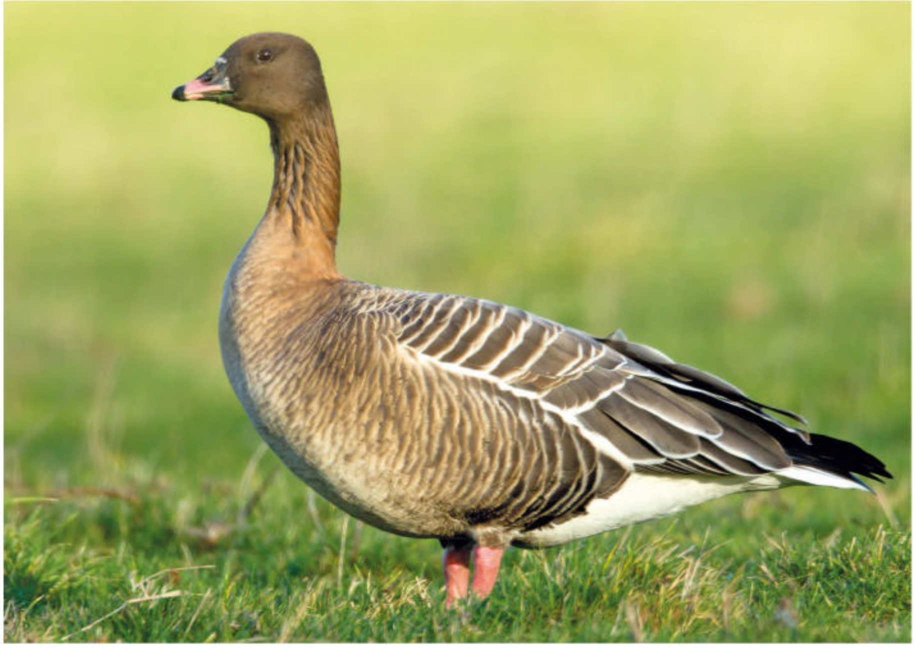


JIM ALMOND (WWW.SHROPSHIREBIRDER.CO.UK)

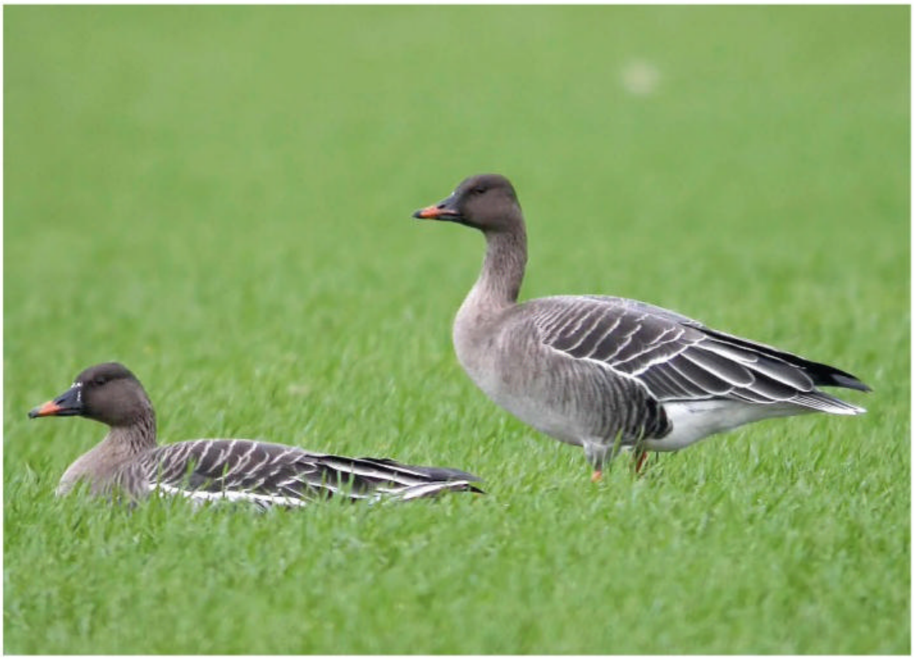
FOUR: Adult Taiga Bean Goose (Kuusamo, Finland, 2 May 2005). Taiga Bean Goose is a rather more elegantly proprtioned bird than Tundra Bean. Its larger size, longer, slimmer bill, smaller head and longer neck all contribute to a somewhat swan-like profile. Though this bird is particularly slim billed, others can appear more similar to some long- or slim-billed Tundra Beans. The plumage resembles that of Tundra Bean Goose, but the bill is typically more extensively orange, as here.



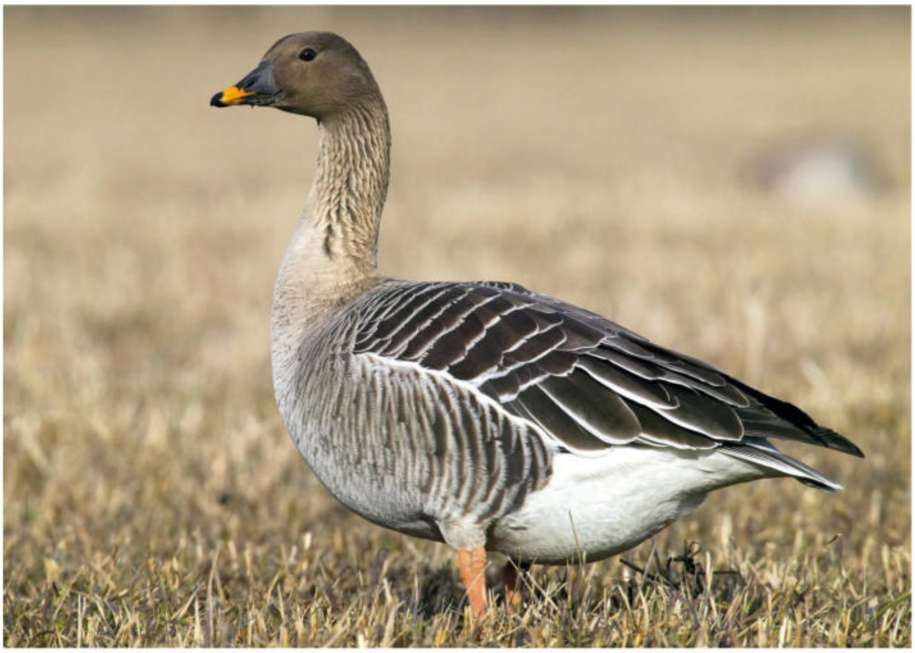
MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)


STEVE KNELL

FIVE: Adult Pink-footed Goose (Holkham, Norfolk, 23 January 2012). This classic side-on portrait shows the structure of Pink-footed Goose well: dumpy and short necked, even when alert, with a small head and a short, small bill. Its legs are also a little on the short side. Shown clearly here is the typical contrast between the rather dark brown head and neck and the paler brown of the rest of the plumage, slightly greyer on the upperparts. The white tips to the upperpart feathers, neatly aligned in rows, age this bird as an adult.

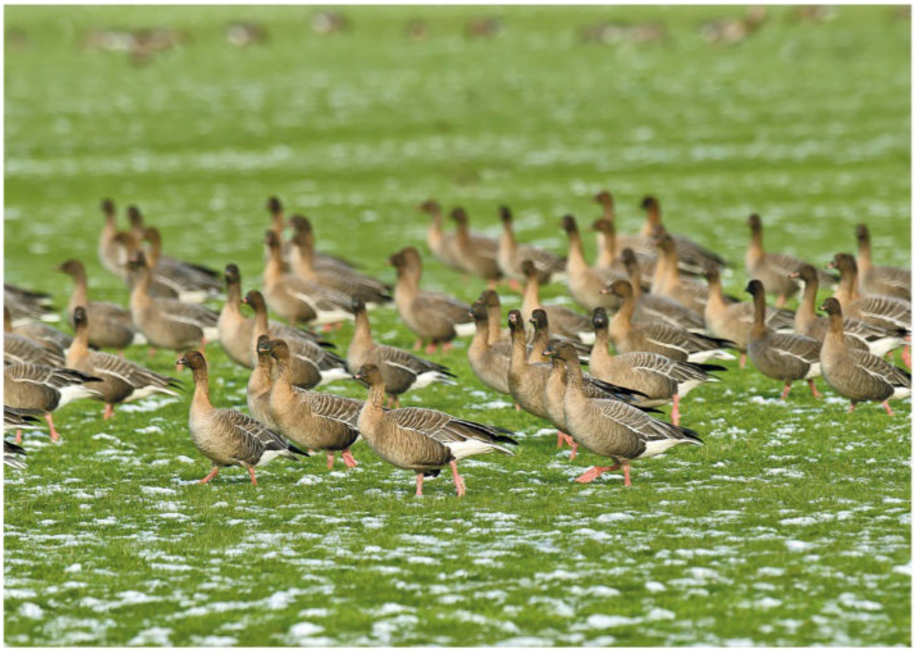

MARK PRIEST

SIX: Adult Tundra Bean Geese (Whitemoor Haye, Staffordshire, 18 December 2004). This species is large, less compact than Pink-footed Goose and its head looks rather large and angular. Adding to its distinctive profile is a heavy, triangular bill. The plumage is, typically for bean geese, rather uniform and brown with crisp white fringes above. Most tellingly, however, the standing bird shows bright orange legs and extensive bright orange on the bill. Note that the sitting bird is longer billed (and also shows limited white feathering around the bill base).


JARI PELTOMÄKI (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

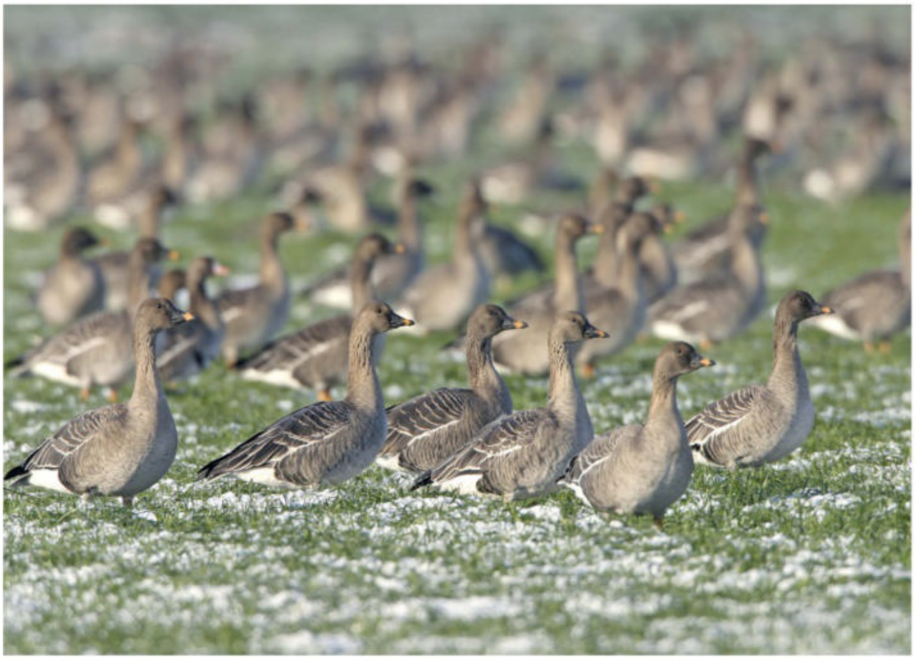
SEVEN: Adult Taiga Bean Goose (Siikajoki, Finland, 25 April 2004). The very large, heavy body, long, thin neck and relatively small-looking head should identify this bird as a Taiga Bean Goose. Unlike the bird in image four, however, this is a particularly short-billed individual, in this respect resembling Tundra Bean Goose. Though bill size and shape can be a useful indicator in the separation of Tundra and Taiga Bean Geese, the variation in both forms is large (as also illustrated in image six). Identification should always be based on an assessment of the whole bird.

EIGHT: Pink-footed Geese (Crosby, Lancashire, 26 January 2013). In Britain, Pink-footed Goose is the only one of our trio which is likely to be seen in numbers. This flock portrait is typical – a closely ranked mass of birds in which the dominant impression is one of dark heads and necks contrasting with paler brown bodies. Clearly visible on many of the birds here are the subtle pale grey hues in the upperparts shown by this species. This impression is never given by either of the bean geese.



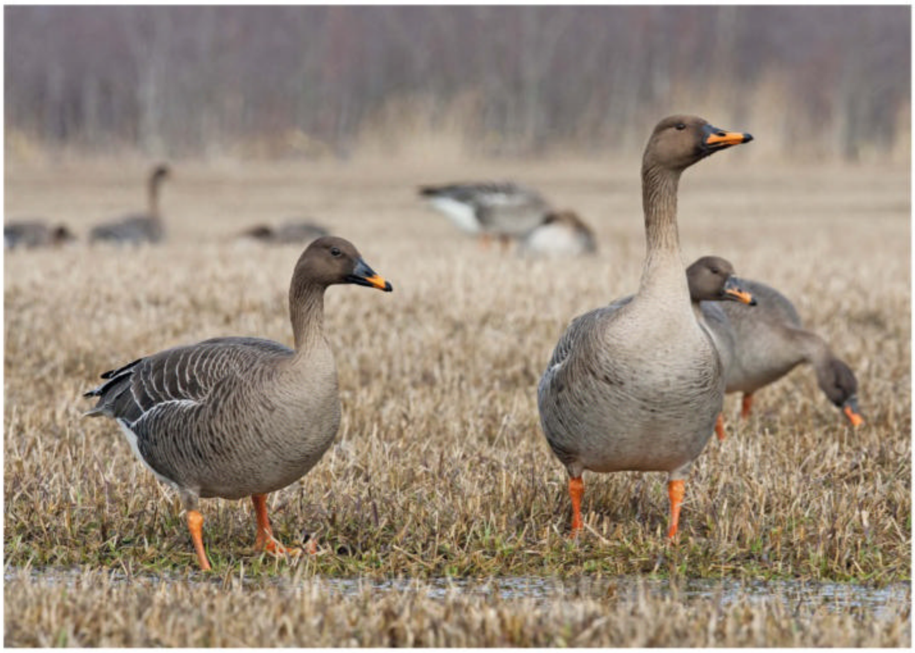
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

NINE: Tundra Bean Goose (Ospeldijk, The Netherlands, 2 January 2004). Structure is often the best way to pick out a Tundra Bean Goose among Pink-feet. These birds are striking: characteristically heavy bodied, with heavy, angular heads and deep, triangular bills. In terms of plumage, they lack the contrasting pale upperside of Pink-footed Goose, being instead a more uniform, drab brown, while the bills are typical of Tundra Bean – largely dark with a prominent orange patch. This is a family party, the right-hand bird and the third from the left being adults. The four young in the foreground can be identified by the more irregular and less neat arrangement of the pale feather tips in the upperparts.



RAN SCHOLS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

TEN: Taiga Bean Goose (Siikajoki, Finland, 25 April 2004). These very large-bodied geese with long, thin necks, small heads and long, slim bills are classic Taiga Bean Geese. Though the largest of our trio, they retain an undoubted swan-like elegance. The rather uniform plumage, entirely brown and white and lacking grey hues, is characteristic of both bean geese, but the extensive orange in the bill is much more typical of Taiga Bean.



JARI PELTOMÄKI (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

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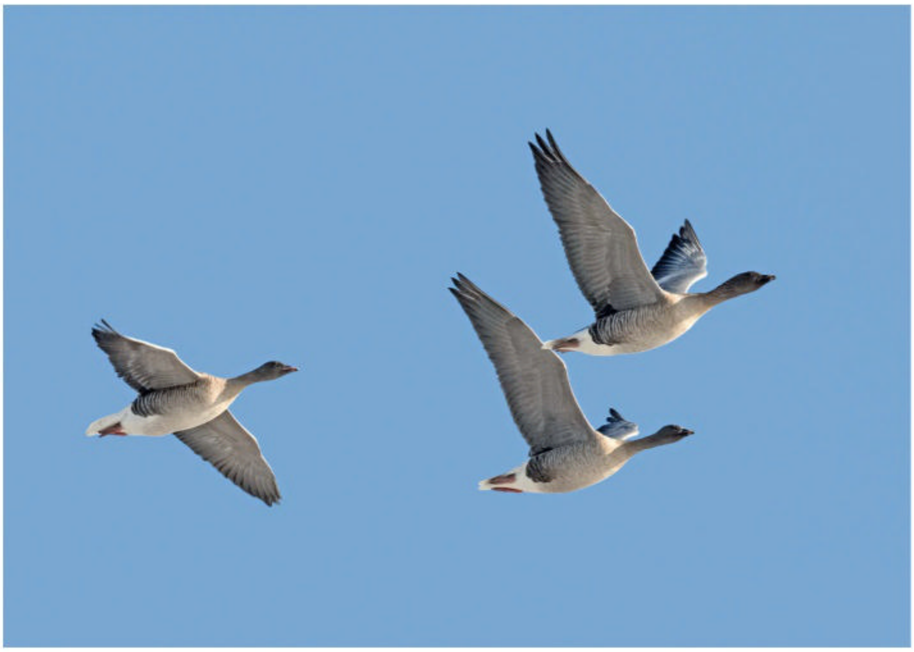
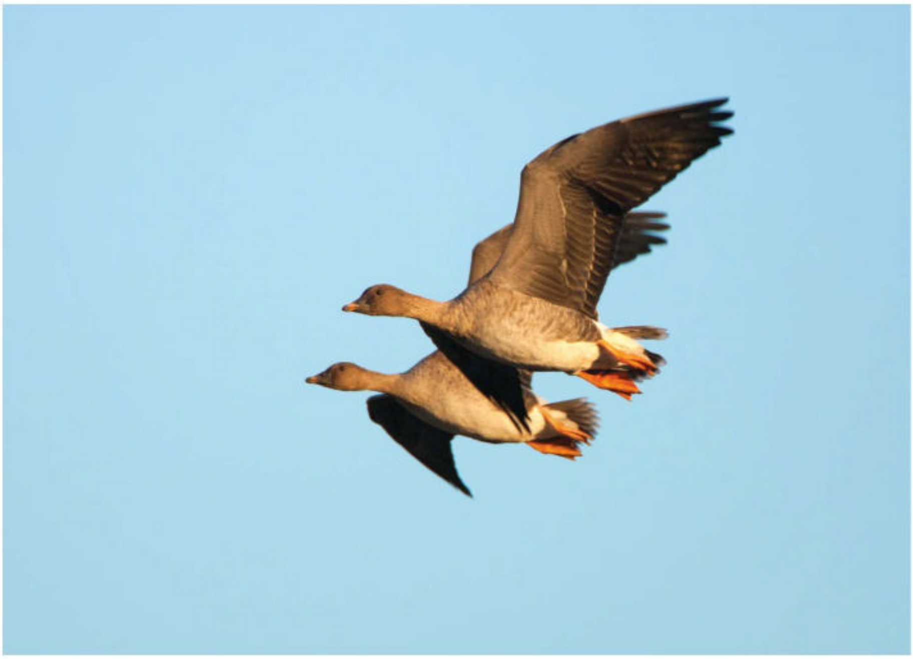


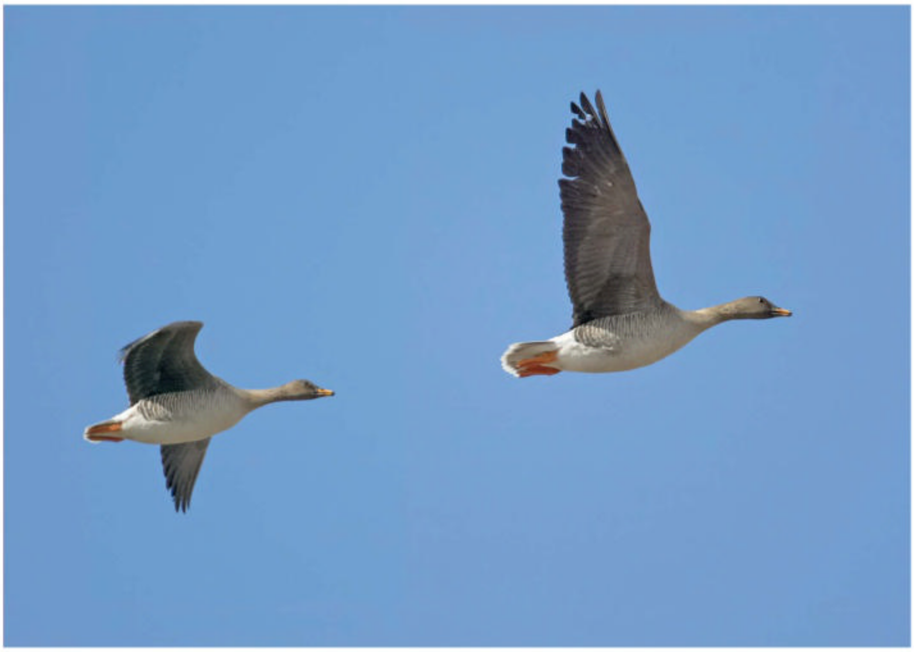
ELEVEN: Pink-footed Geese (Lumijoki, Finland, 14 April 2007). With their compact, dumpy flight silhouette, short, rather thick necks and short, stubby bills, these grey geese can be quickly identified as Pink-footed Geese. Also typical is the very strong contrast between the dark head and neck and the paler body, while just visible on the two right-hand birds is a characteristic flash of pale grey forewing. Though never as striking as that shown by Greylag Goose, it is nevertheless an eye-catching feature of this species.

JAN WEGENER (WWW.BIRDIMAGENCY.COM)

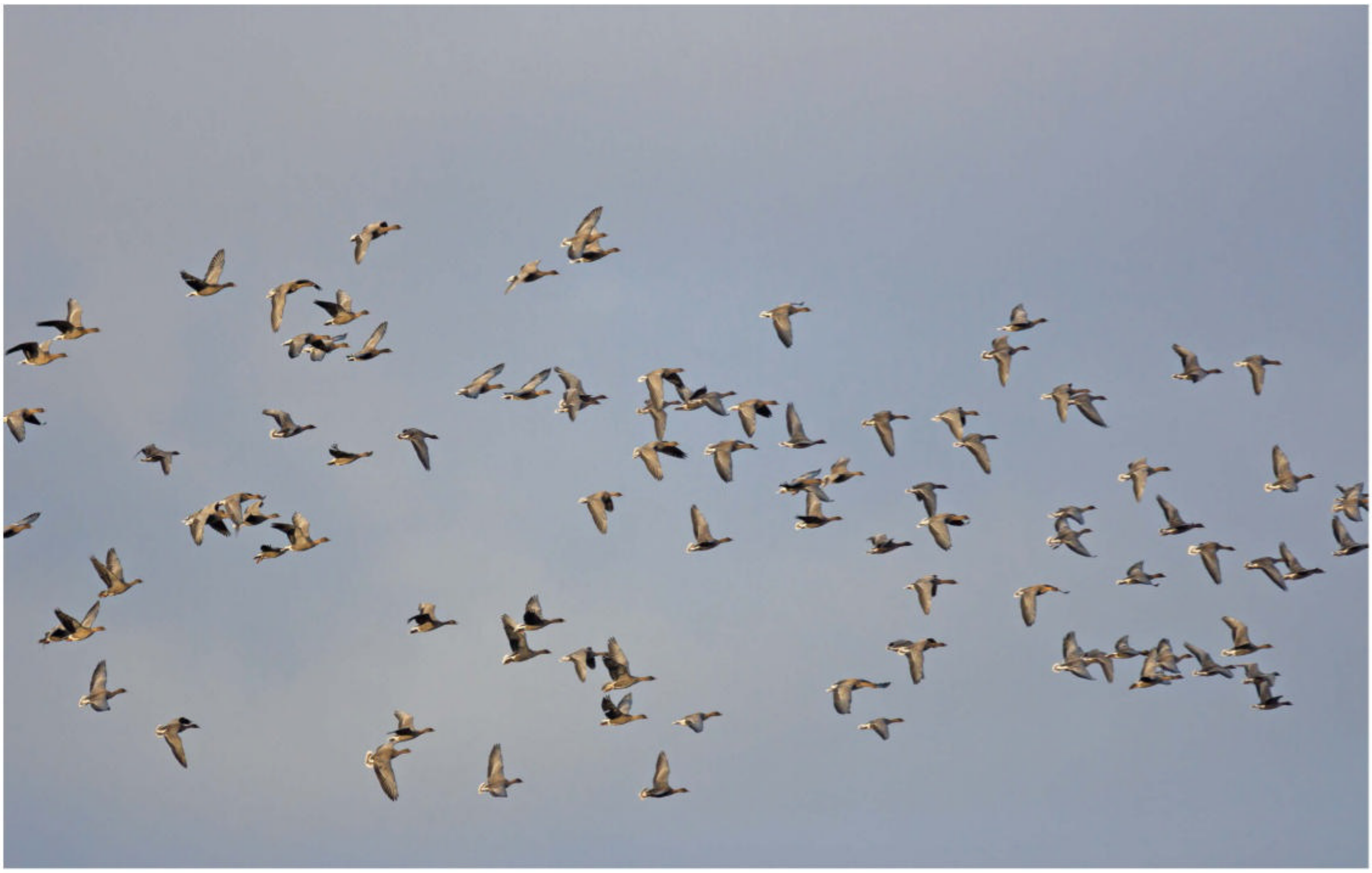


TWELVE: Tundra Bean Geese (Brandenburg, Germany, 30 October 2005). These flying Tundra Bean Geese lack strong contrasts between the head and neck and body, being much more uniformly toned. Easily visible here too is the heavy, slightly too-large-looking head and the deep triangular bill. Though bare part colours can be difficult to assess on birds in flight, the bill patch and legs on these birds are unequivocally bright orange.

MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

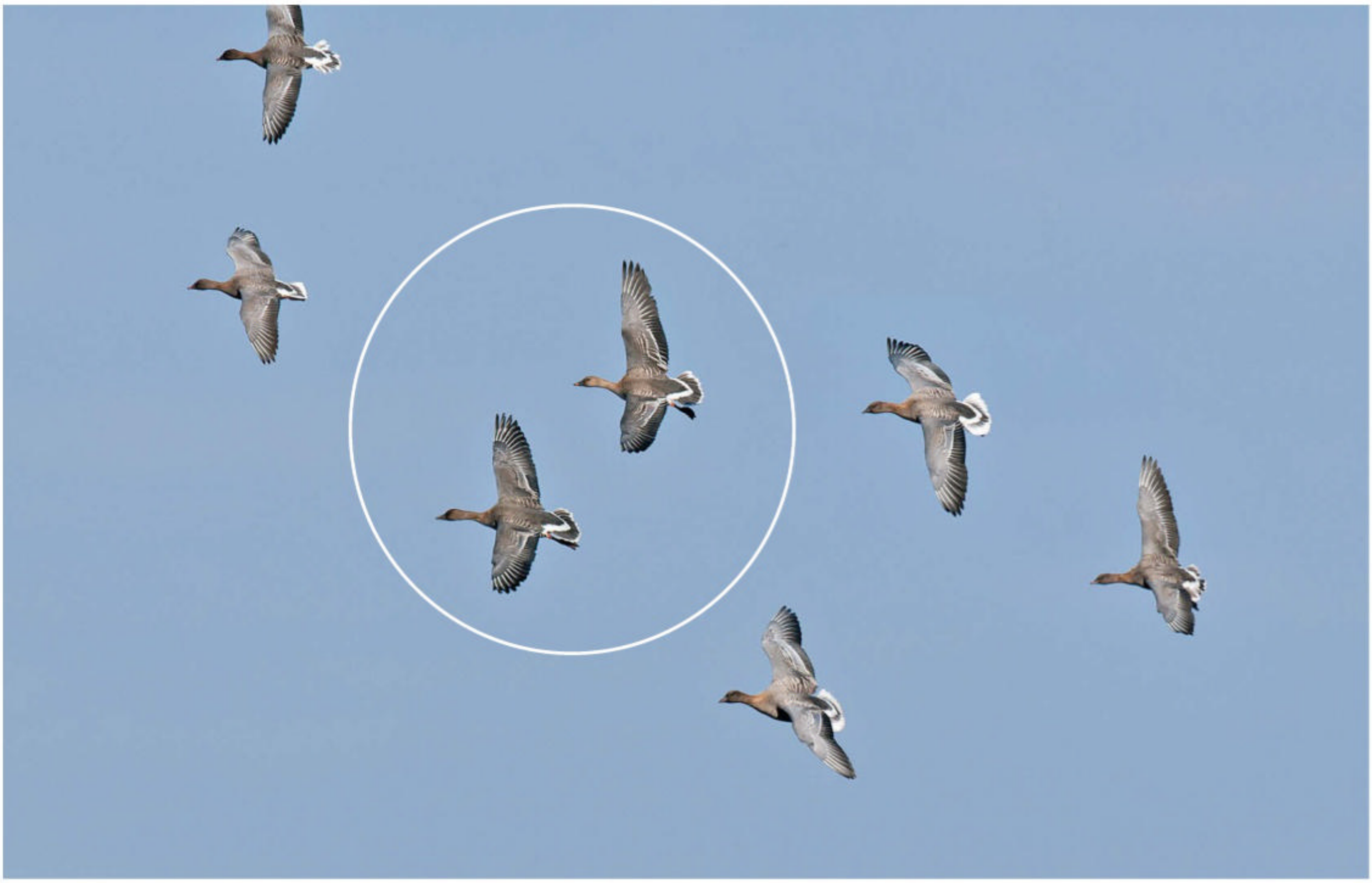


THIRTEEN: Taiga Bean Geese (Liminka, Finland, 25 April 2003). Typically, these flying Taiga Bean Geese combine large size with elegant structure. They are large bodied, but the neck is long and thin, the head is small and the bill is slender. Typically on flying bean geese, there are no strong plumage contrasts. Perhaps the most obvious feature of these birds is the extensive orange on the bill.



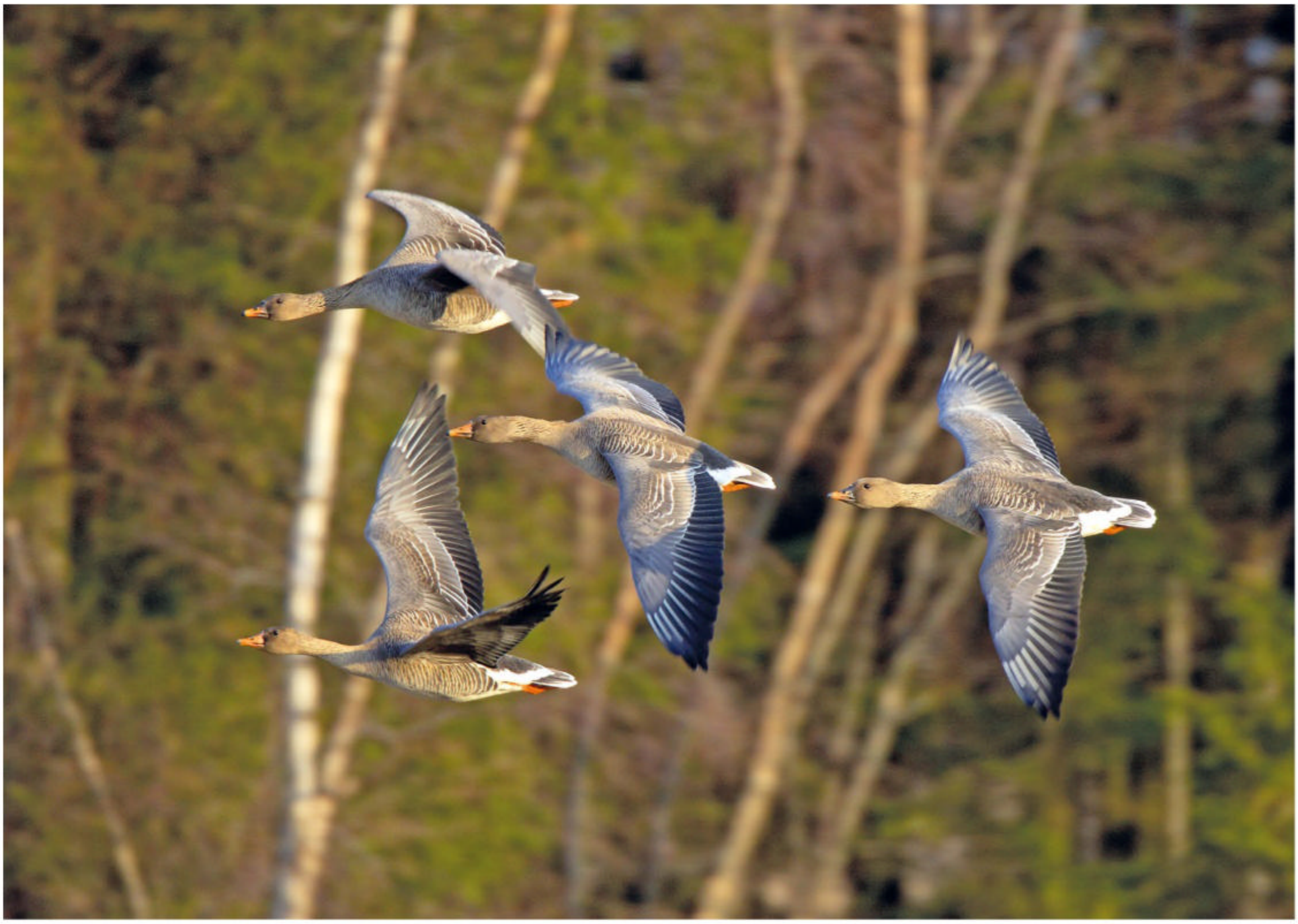
OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

FOURTEEN: Pink-footed Geese (Holkham, Norfolk, 26 January 2006). This is a typical view of Pink-footed Geese on the wing. Note again the dumpy, compact structure, dark head and neck contrasting with the paler body, and relatively pronounced pale grey forewing. Also visible on these birds is a broad white tip to the tail. What sadly cannot be communicated here is the wonderful sound of these birds as their flocks fill the sky.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

FIFTEEN: Tundra Bean and Pink-footed Geese (Plex Moss, Lancashire, 11 March 2010). The two Tundra Bean Geese here (circled) are not immediately obvious, but a closer look reveals their slightly larger size, longer necks and heavier bills. In contrast to the accompanying Pink-footed Geese, their plumage looks more brown, lacking grey hues, while the forewing is dull, not contrastingly pale, and the white tip to the tail is narrow.


MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

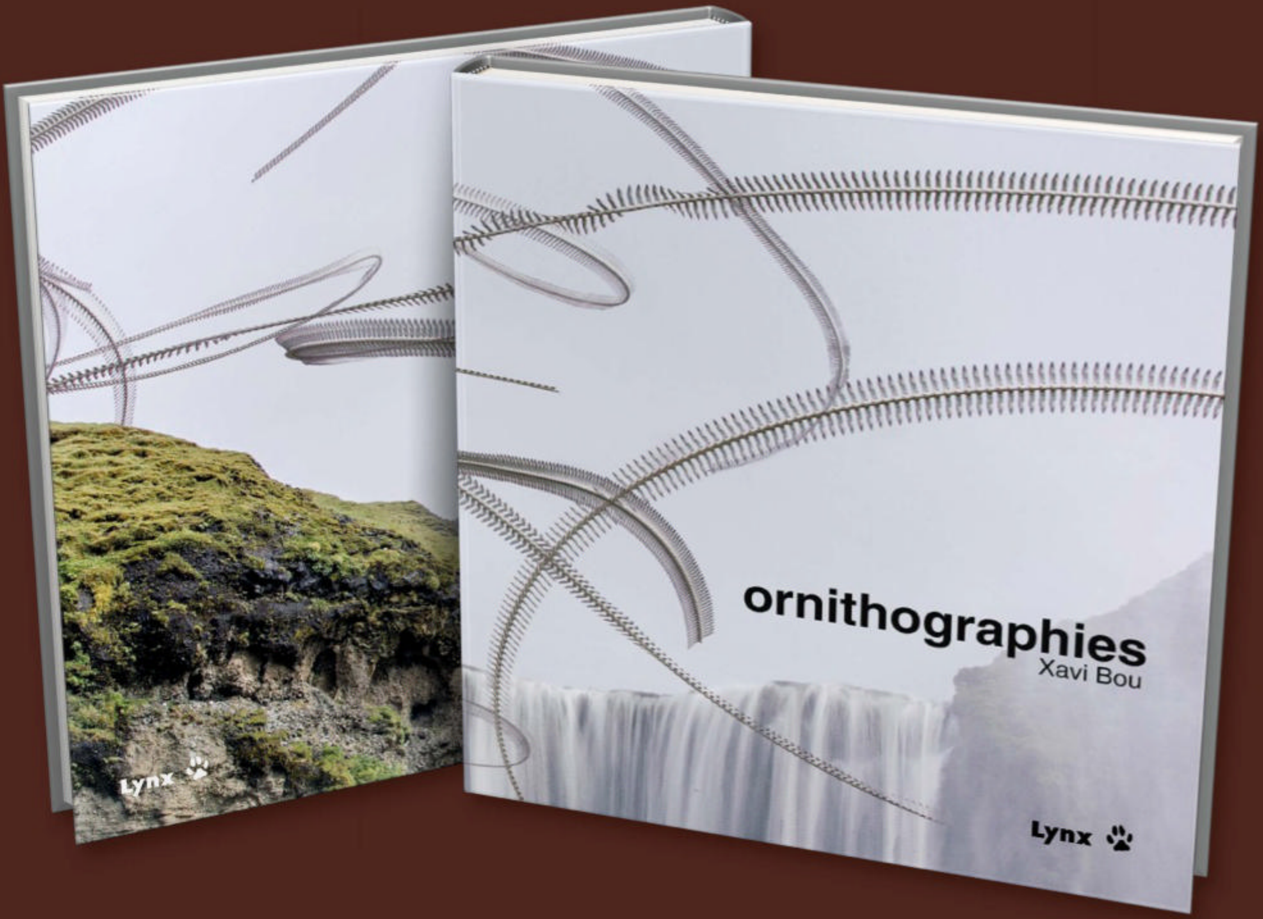
SIXTEEN: Taiga Bean Geese (Liminka, Finland, 25 April 2006). These Taiga Bean Geese manage to look, as always, both powerful and elegant. Their bodies are big, but the necks are long, the heads small and the bills quite long. The plain brown plumage hues are obvious, as are the subtly paler forewings and the relatively narrow white tips to the tails. Note here the variation in bill patterning, with two birds having the typical extensive orange colour of this form, while the other two show more restricted orange patches reminiscent of Tundra Bean Goose.

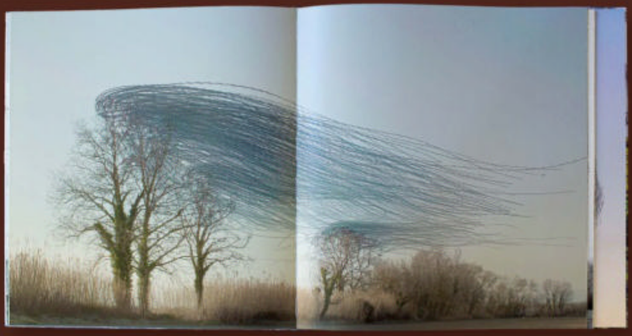
## Find your own Pink-footed, Taiga Bean and Tundra Bean Geese

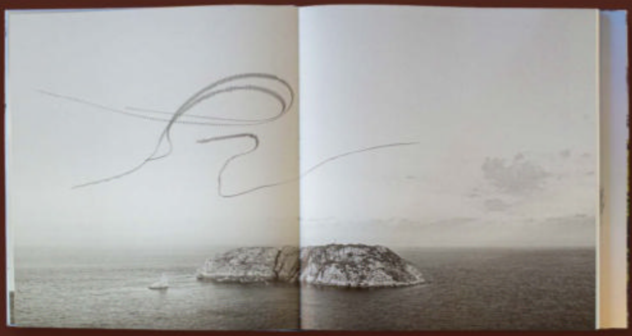
By far the commonest of these three tricky goose species is Pink-footed Goose, and Britain holds huge gatherings each winter. Try the grazing marshes of north Norfolk, Martin Mere WWT, Lancashire (SD 4214), or the east Scottish coast.

England's sole flock of wintering Taiga Bean Geese can be found on the marshes of the Yare Valley at Buckenham and Cantley (TG 3605), but have declined to the point that they may disappear altogether. The other site that attracts a regular flock is the Slamannan Plateau, Forth and Clyde (NS 8373), though they may take some finding.

Tundra Bean Geese are less predictable but, paradoxically, a little more widespread, though limited in number. This species is at best a scarce visitor, if not a genuine rarity in most counties; it occurs most frequently in East Anglia and the South-East. It is most regular on grazing marshes at sites such as Pilling Lane Ends (SD 3749), Cockerham Moss (SD 4448) and Plex Moss (SD 3410), Lancashire, Minsmere RSPB (TM 4766), North Warren RSPB (TM 4657) and Kesslingland Level (TM 5285), all Suffolk, Breydon Water (TG 4907) and the Wells/Holkham area (TF 8544), Norfolk, The Wash (TF 5144), Ouse Washes RSPB (TL 4685), Cambridgeshire, and nearby Welney WWT, and Harty Marshes (TR 0268) on Sheppey, Kent. Occasional birds can turn up almost anywhere there is suitable grazing or roosting habitat and a goose flock of almost any species or combination of species – perhaps try Baltasound (HP 6208), Unst, Shetland, Slimbridge WWT (SO 7204), Gloucestershire, or Wexford Wildfowl Reserve (T 0724), Co Wexford, on the off-chance, too.







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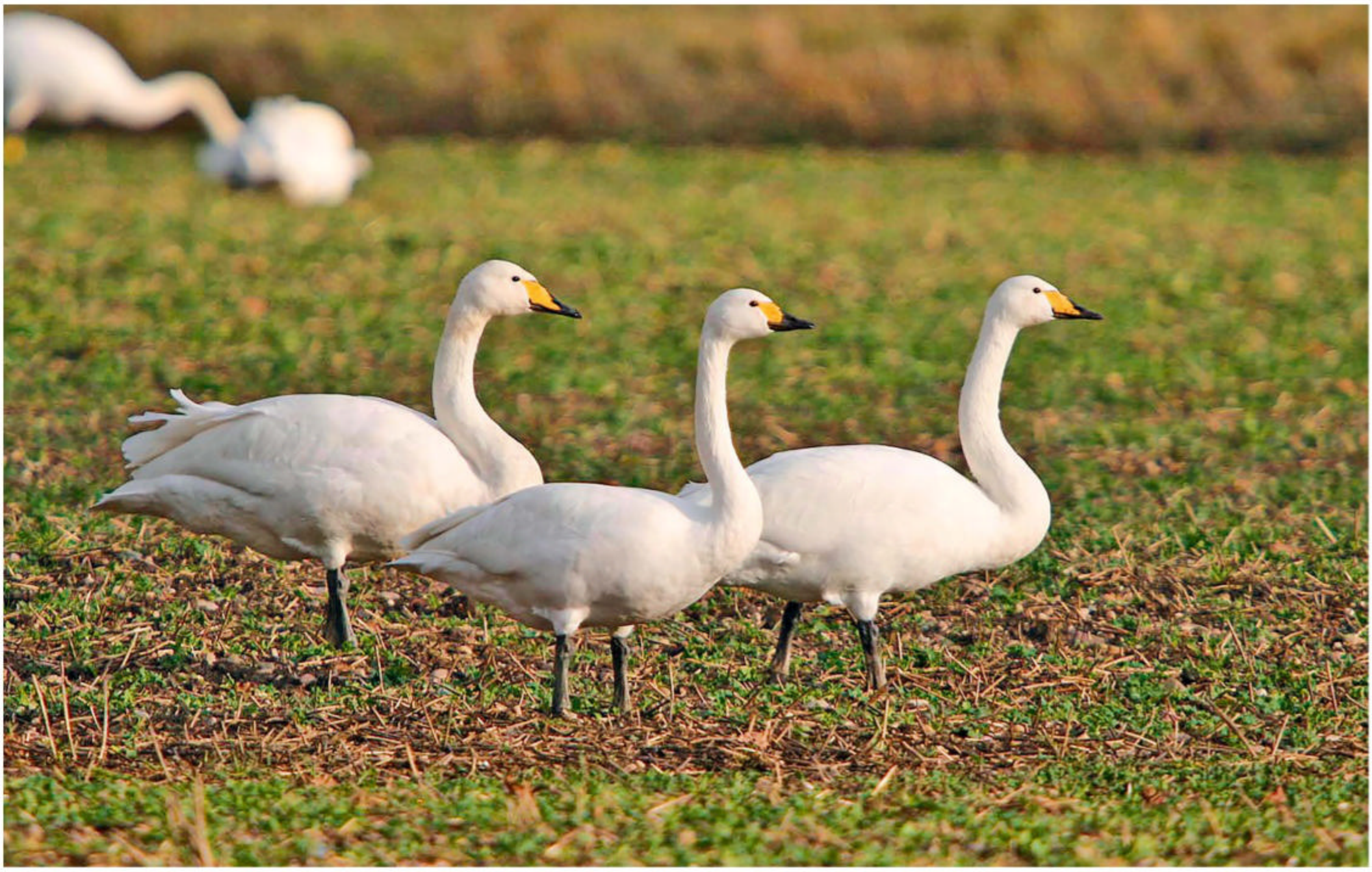
# Mute, Whooper and Bewick's Swans

Words by Andy Stoddart



MARK PRIEST

ONE: Adult Bewick's (centre) and Whooper Swans (Whitemoor Haye, Staffordshire, 10 December 2009). This is a highly instructive portrait of the two wild swan species side by side. With such a handy comparison it is easy to appreciate the smaller body size, shorter neck, smaller, more rounded head and shorter bill with more restricted yellow of the Bewick's Swan. If only all views of wild swans were as good as this!

Wildfowl provide one of the great spectacles of the colder months of the year, and among the teeming hordes on fields and marshes across the country there is no more graceful group than the swans. It is at this time that swan numbers and diversity peak, with the similar Whooper and Bewick's joining the resident Mute. With them come identification issues, especially with lone wild swans or birds seen distantly or in unusual locations. Andy Stoddart outlines the pointers to look for when separating these elegant but similar species.

# Basic Principles

The Mute Swan is a familiar year-round resident in Britain, but in winter it is joined by our two 'wild swan' species, Whooper and Bewick's Swans. Few sights and sounds are more evocative of a cold, grey winter day than those of these magnificent Arctic visitors, but as well as providing a memorable aesthetic experience they can also pose real identification difficulties.

### Mute Swan

Although Mute Swan has a long history in Britain with well-established royal connections, it is not a native species. It occurs widely in continental Europe (where it is also introduced), but as a truly wild species is native to East Asia.

This must be one of our most instantly recognisable birds. It is a relatively common and usually tame resident, generally encountered as a lone pair in the breeding season but often in flocks in the winter. It frequents a variety of freshwater habitats including lakes, reservoirs, gravel pits and rivers but, particularly in winter, it can also be found in estuarine habitats. It is a relatively sedentary species, with few long-distance movements noted, though ringing has shown some interchange with the near-Continent.

Its identification is straightforward. Outside the winter period it is the only swan species to occur in Britain, but during this season a more positive diagnosis can be made from the classic pose so beloved of photographers – an elegantly curved neck and wings raised in threat display. At any reasonable distance the characteristic bright orange bill with a prominent dark 'knob' (larger in the male), nostrils and cutting edges are obvious. The adult plumage is wholly white, with most young birds heavily 'clouded' dark grey.

Although capable of some rather harsh calls and inelegant hissing noises when threatened, the species is generally silent at rest, a trait from which it derives its name. In flight, however, it is noisy, producing loud, rhythmic, throbbing sounds, though these derive not from any calls but from the movement of its flight feathers through the air.

### Whooper Swan

Although a tiny handful of pairs nests in Britain, Whooper Swan is essentially a winter visitor here. It breeds in the Low Arctic from Iceland in the west to the Russian Far East, and, although some Finnish birds reach Britain, the vast majority of our wintering population derives from Iceland. It arrives in October and departs mainly in March. Between these dates it occurs widely in small flocks across northern and western Britain, but also concentrates in larger numbers at some sites. Key areas include north-east Scotland, the Solway Firth, south-west Lancashire and, particularly in recent years, the Ouse Washes in Norfolk and Cambridgeshire.

At close range, Whooper Swan is easy to identify. Unlike Mute Swan, its neck is usually held stiffly erect and it never adopts the raised wing pose of its cousin. Adults are white, often with 'rusty' staining on the head and neck, while young birds are 'clouded' pale grey, young Icelandic birds being particularly pale. The real differences lie in the bill, however – wedge-shaped and dark with an extensive yellow base which reaches forward to a point below the nostrils, and which can also extend over the culmen. The bill-base feathering is straight.

Whooper Swans are noisy, both at rest and in flight, and, particularly when in numbers, they are hard to miss. Their wings do not create the noise of a Mute Swan but they make up for this with their wild cries – a loud, resonant trumpeting or bugling, often comprising three or four notes and audible at great range.

### Bewick's Swan

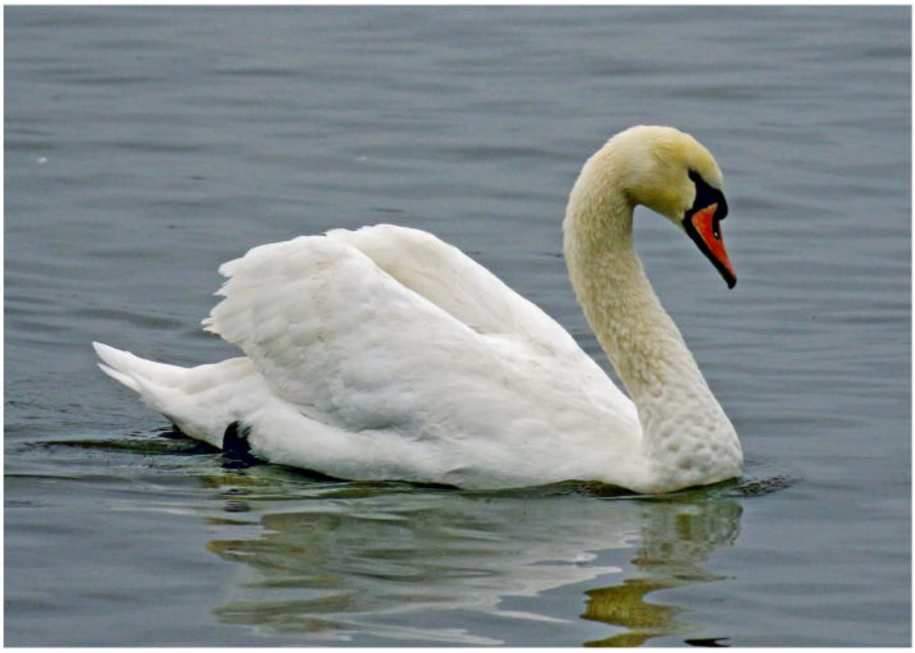
This, the second of our 'winter swans', has an extensive High Arctic breeding range which stretches across the whole of Siberia. Our wintering birds arrive here via the Baltic, northern Germany and The Netherlands, reaching us in late October and November and departing mainly in March. Its winter distribution in Britain is more southerly than that of Whooper Swan, favouring traditional sites such as Slimbridge in Gloucestershire (the birthplace of Peter Scott's Wildfowl Trust) and the Ouse Washes. Unlike Whooper Swan, Bewick's is increasingly seen as a conservation priority, with winter numbers in Britain in decline.

Bewick's Swans are easy to identify with good views. Adults are white, youngsters 'clouded' grey. They are smaller and more compact compared to Whooper Swan, shorter-necked and with a smaller bill, more concave on the upper mandible, and with a variable though generally smaller extent of yellow at the base of the bill and over the culmen. Indeed, so variable is this area of yellow in its extent and shape that Peter Scott and subsequent swan students have long been able to identify individuals, work out family relationships and track movements. The bill-base feathering is gently rounded.

Bewick's Swans are also noisy, both at rest and in flight, giving a rather softer, more muffled call than their larger relative and generally giving single or double calls.

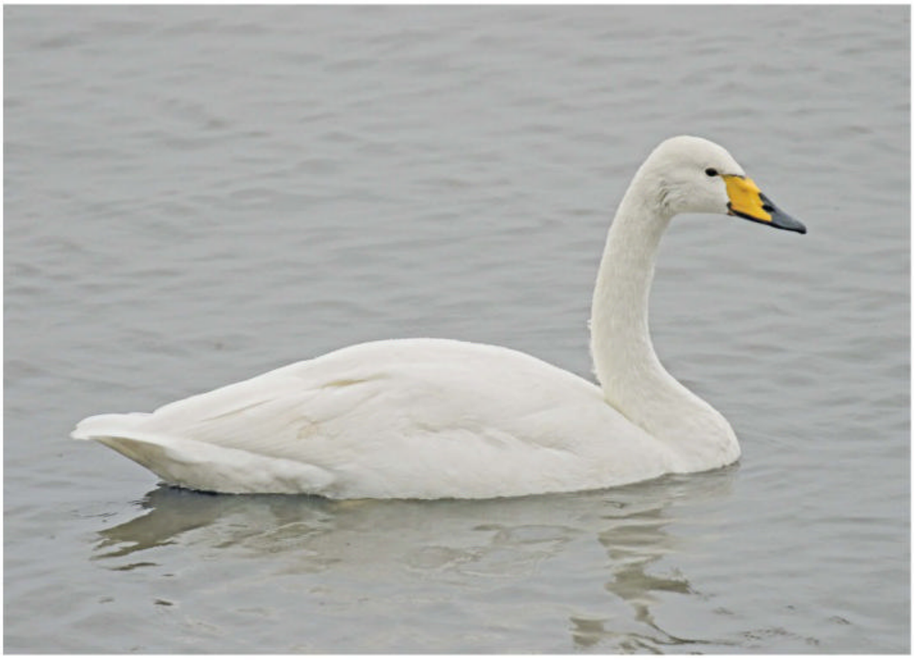
At range, however, the structural and vocal differences between the two wild swans are less clear and, particularly away from known wintering sites, the two species can be surprisingly hard to separate. It is even more difficult for observers who don't come into contact with these swans every day (and that's most of us), and it is not unusual for the same flock of swans to be recorded as both Whoopers and Bewick's. In cases of doubt, it is safer to log them as 'wild swan sp' and just enjoy the spectacle.

A final twist in the identification tale is provided by the Nearctic subspecies of Bewick's Swan – nominate *columbianus*, generally known as Whistling Swan. This is a very rare vagrant to Britain, with only two accepted individuals, and is identifiable only by a very tiny or preferably entirely absent patch of yellow in the bill base. The greatest identification risks are a Siberian bird with reduced yellow on the bill, or a bird with a muddy and therefore apparently all-dark bill.



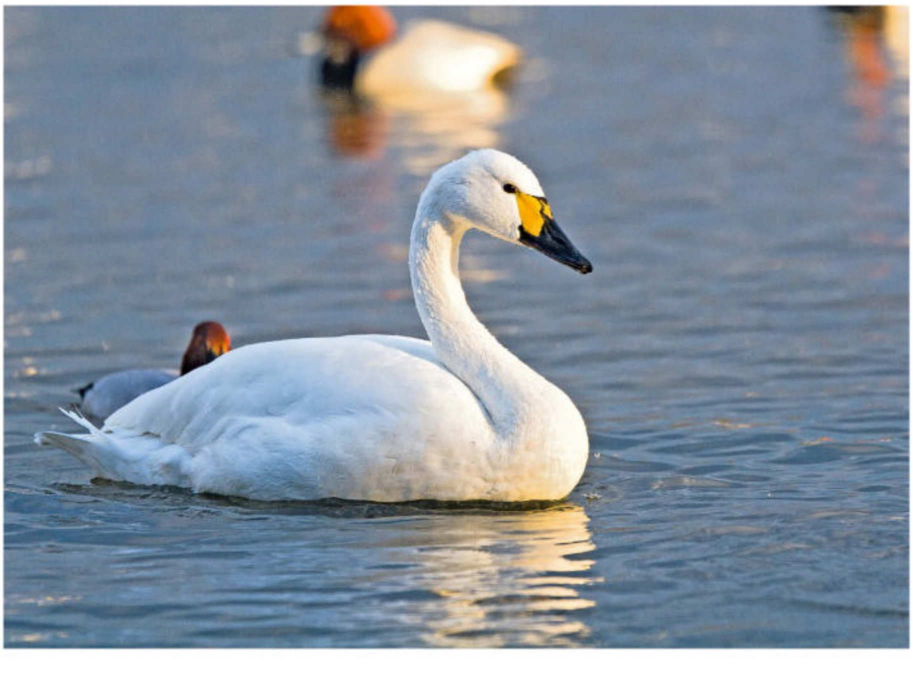
DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM)

TWO: Adult Mute Swan (Welney WWT, Norfolk, 12 November 2016). This is a classic portrait indeed. With its elegantly curved neck and raised wings, this is the archetypal Mute Swan image. It is hardly even necessary to look at the bill but the brilliant orange colour with black 'knob', bill base and cutting edges are immediately obvious.



DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM)

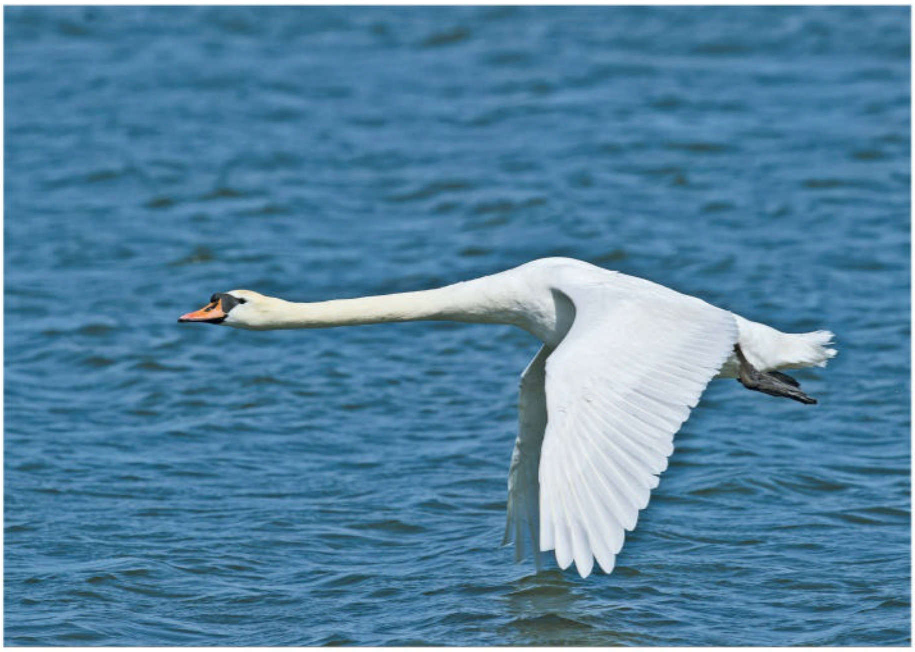
THREE: Adult Whooper Swan (Welney WWT, Norfolk, 12 November 2016). Whooper Swan typically shows a straight neck though, as here, the relaxed neck can also adopt a more curved profile. Note too that the wings are held fully folded away. Although resembling Mute Swan in size and shape, the most striking feature of this bird is its bill – long and wedge-shaped with an almost straight culmen and very extensive yellow extending forwards in a wedge shape to below the nostril.



HOWARD BOTTRELL (WWW.ECOVISUALS.COM)

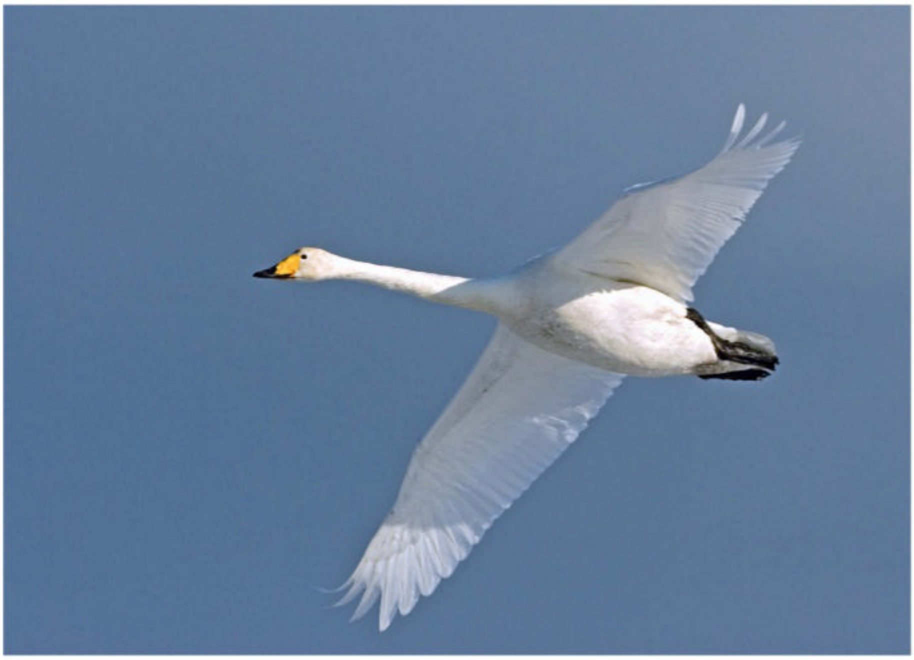
FOUR: Adult Bewick's Swan (Slimbridge WWT, Gloucestershire, 5 January 2007). The slightly smaller size of this Bewick's Swan is hinted at here by comparison with the Common Pochard in the background. However, the most useful features relate once more to the bill – slightly shorter than Whooper Swan but with a more concave profile and a much more restricted and rounded yellow patch which stops well short of the nostril.

FIVE: Adult Mute Swan (Seaforth, Lancashire, 3 May 2015). Mute Swans in flight are impressive. Massive and heavy, they push the boundaries of avian flight and require a long take-off run. Once airborne they are noisy, not due to their calls but to the loud, rhythmic throbbing caused by the flight feathers as they move through the air.



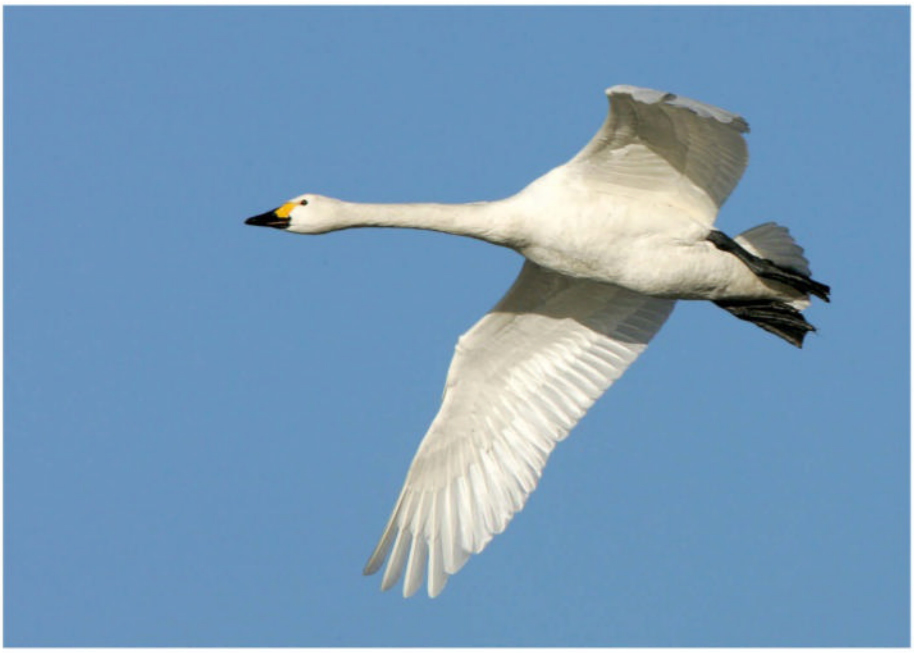
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

SIX: Adult Whooper Swan (Hokkaido, Japan, 3 September 2009). This flying Whooper Swan looks typically very long-necked and the bill pattern – lots of yellow reaching forward in a wedge – is easy enough to see. However, at range, such detail would be invisible and assessing the true neck length would become a rather more subjective exercise. Even with experience, distant wild swans can be tricky.

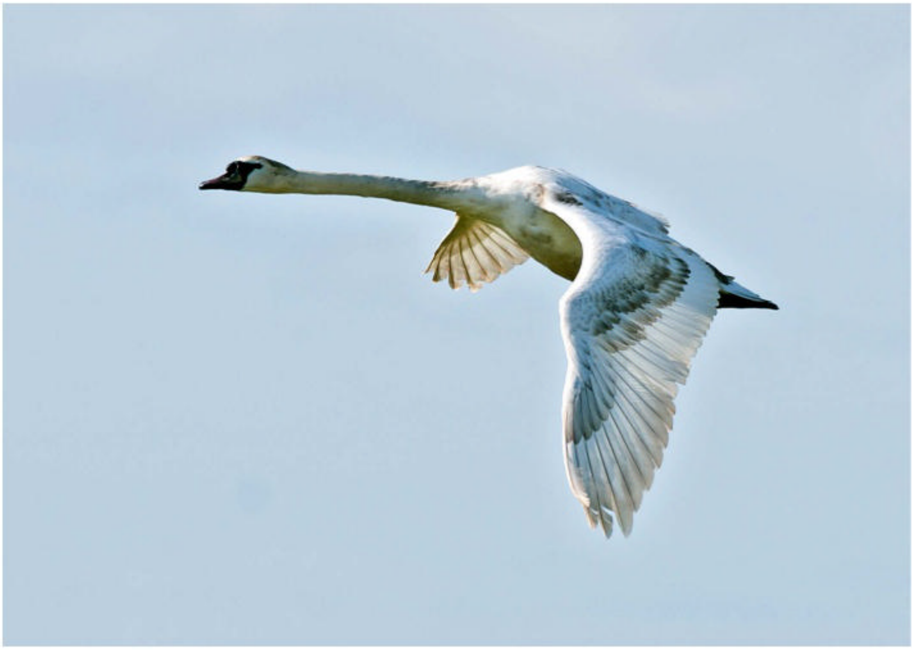


ROY DE HAAS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

SEVEN: Adult Bewick's Swan (Newsham, Northumberland, 18 January 2010). The typical Bewick's Swan bill pattern – restricted yellow in a rather circular patch – is easily seen here. Also apparent is the slightly shorter neck compared with that of the above Whooper Swan though, at range and with no handy comaprison, assessing this gets a bit more difficult. Bewick's Swan is a long-necked bird too!

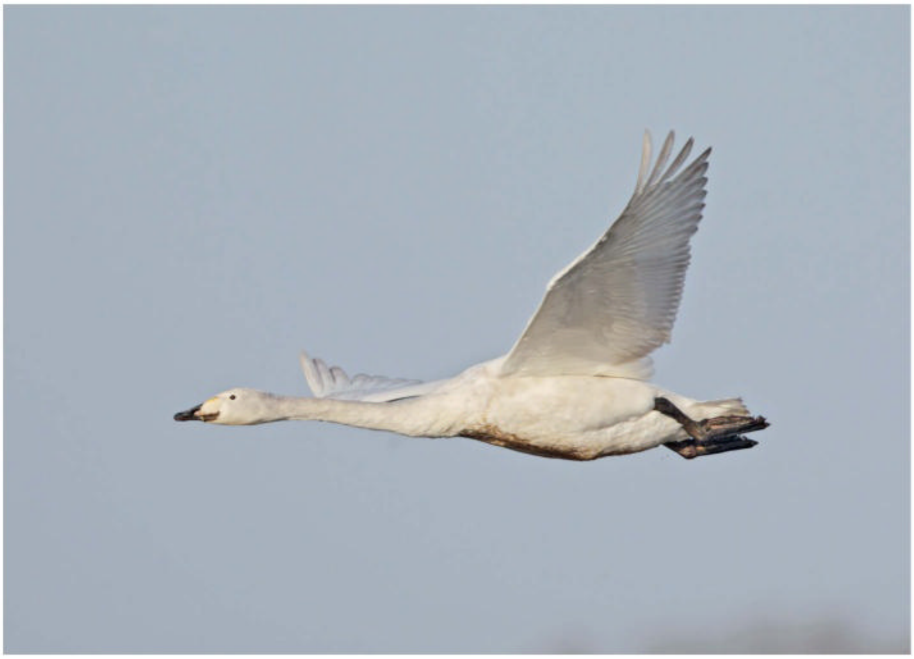


TOM TAMS



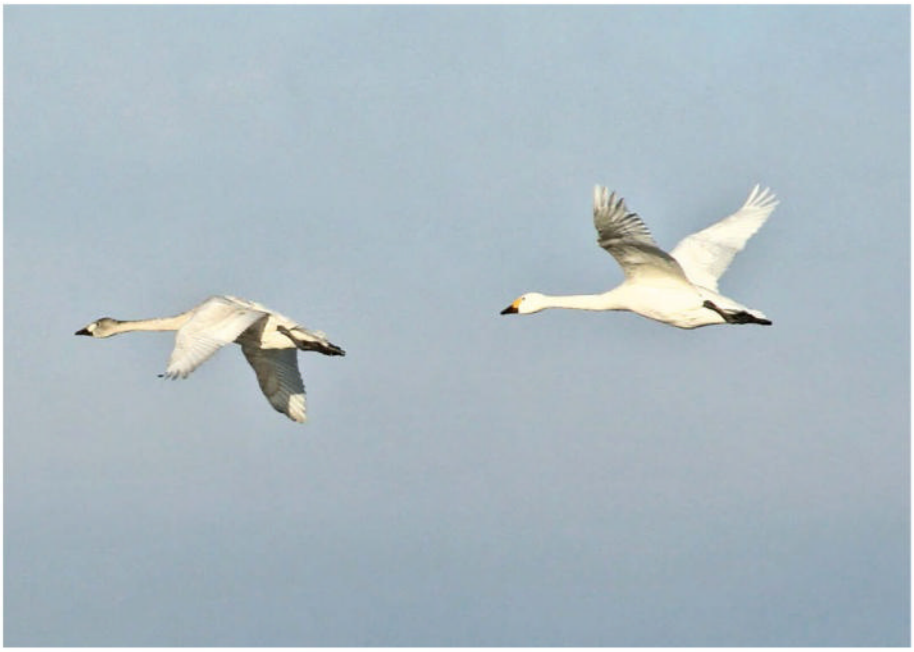
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

EIGHT: First-winter Mute Swan (Seaforth, Lancashire, 8 May 2009). The very dark smudgy markings in the upperparts and upperwing coverts are typical features of a young Mute Swan, and note also the dark bill with characteristic 'knob'. In life, of course, these details would be somewhat academic – at such close range the noise from the wings would be deafening!



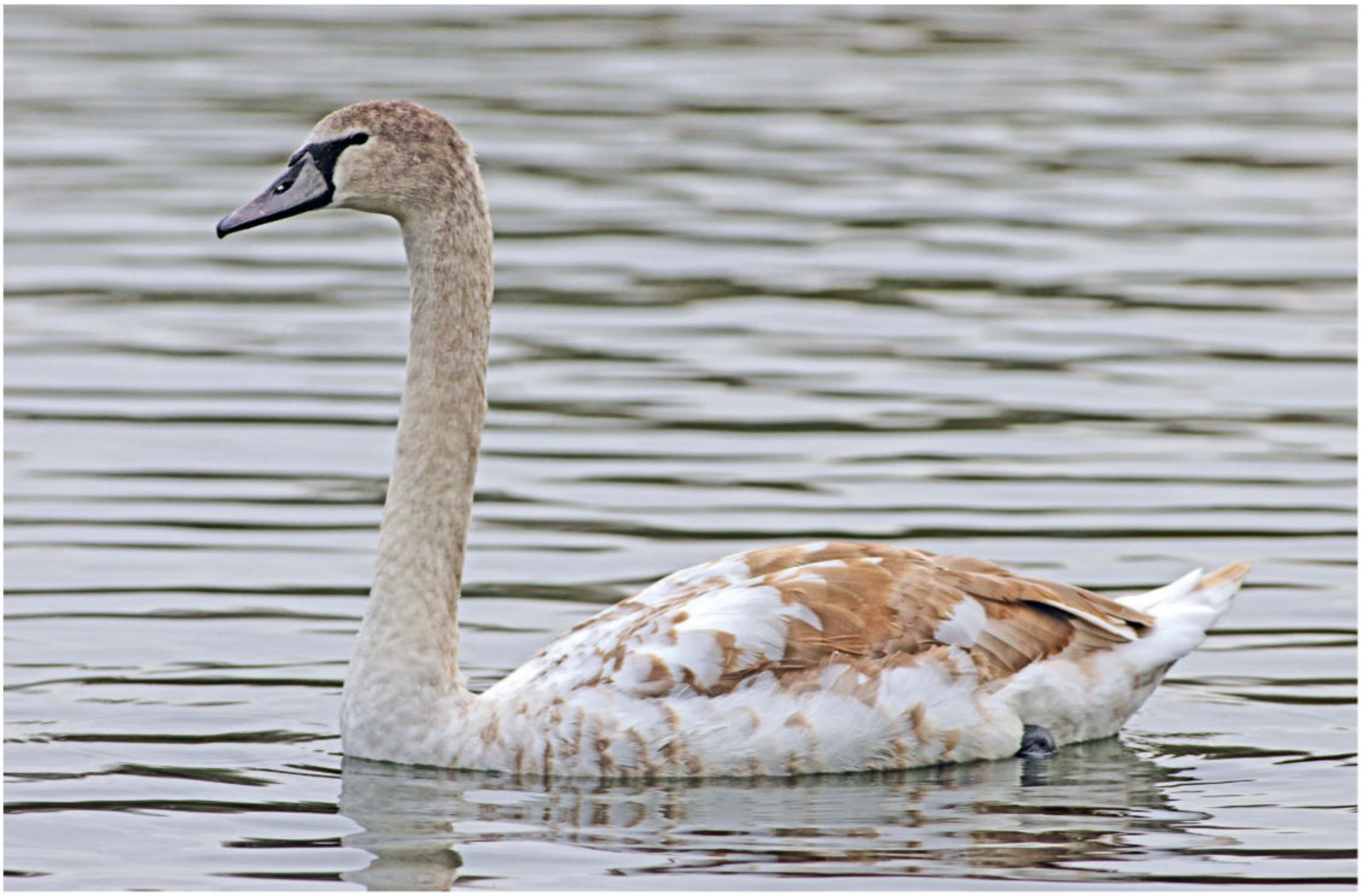
JAMES LOWEN

NINE: First-winter Whooper Swan (Welney WWT, Norfolk, 24 January 2015). This flying Whooper Swan looks very long-necked but, to be sure, we can check the bill and note the typically extensive yellow patch – it is wedge-shaped and reaches well forward on the bill.



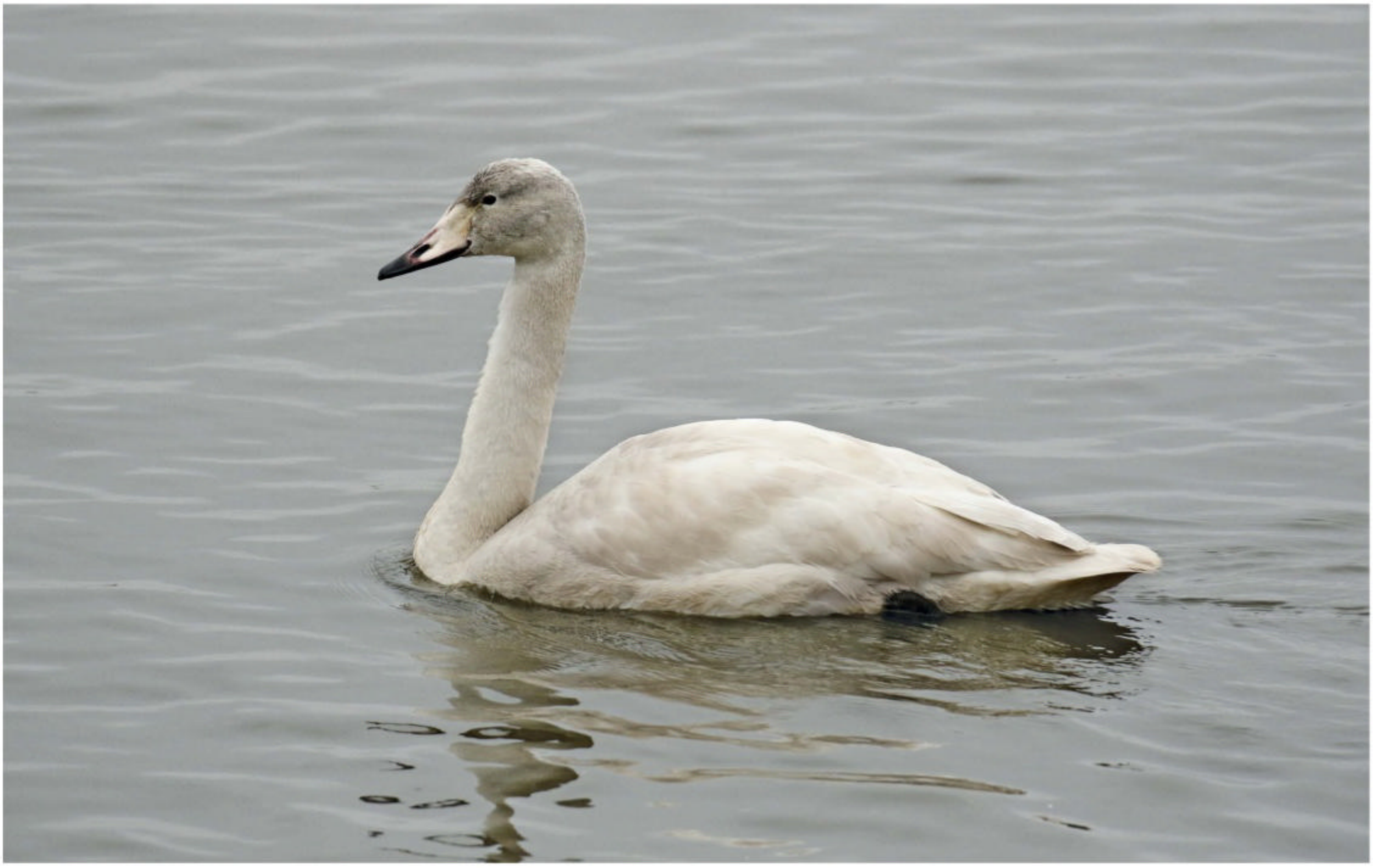
MARK CAUNT

TEN: First-winter Bewick's Swan (Montrose Basin, Angus, 12 January 2008). The neck length is hard to judge on these flying Bewick's Swans, so the restricted pale yellow in the bill base offers the best clue to its identity.



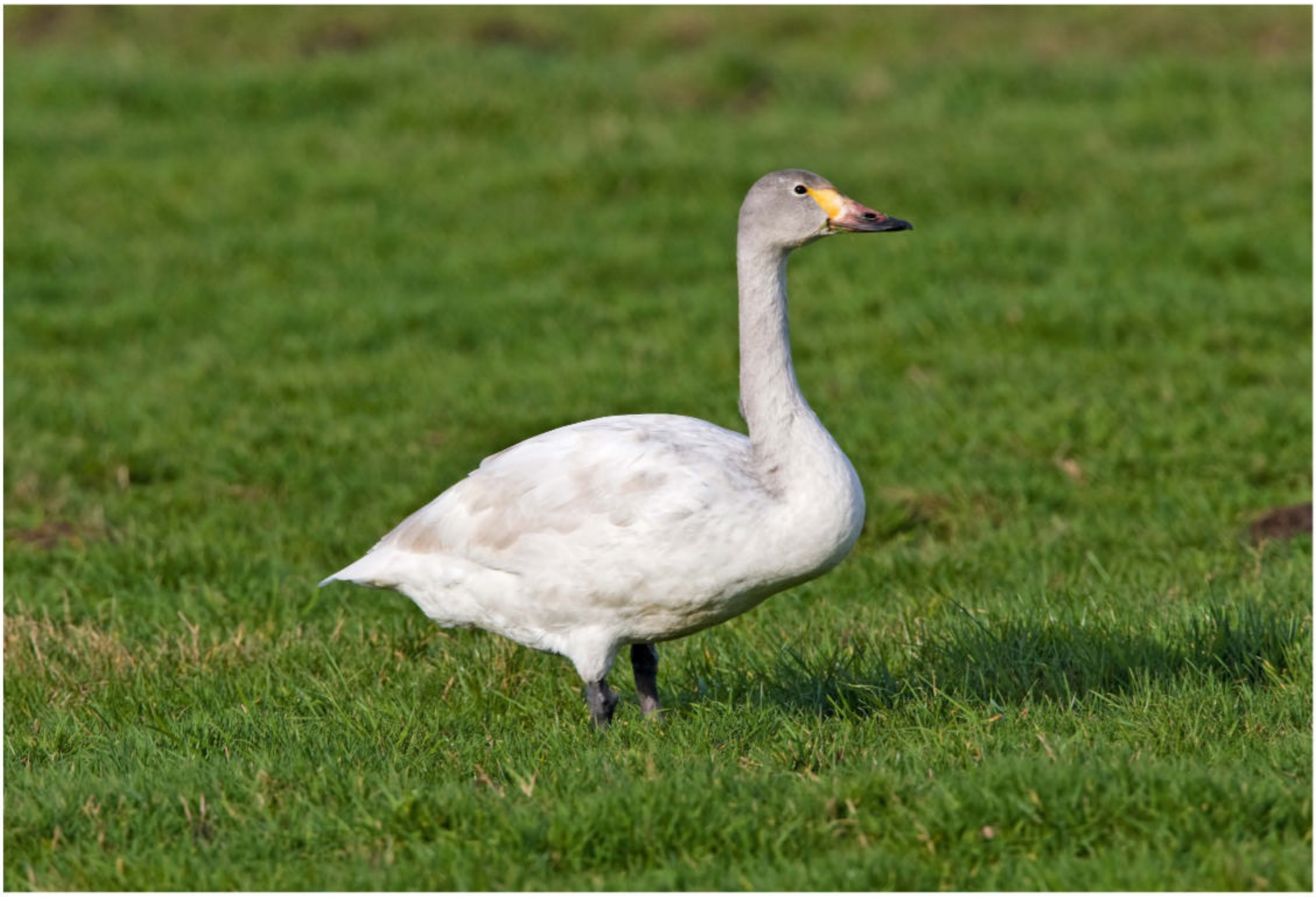
DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM)

ELEVEN: Juvenile Mute Swan (Fishers Green, Essex, 27 November 2016). Although straight-necked in this picture, this bird is easily identified as a young Mute Swan. The bill, although lacking the bright orange hues and pronounced 'knob' of an adult, still shows the correct basic patterning. The rather prominent and patchy dark feathering in the upperparts – either grey or, as here, more gingery-brown – is also typical of a young Mute Swan.



DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM)

TWELVE: Juvenile Whooper Swan (Welney WWT, Norfolk, 12 November 2016). By contrast, young wild swans, particularly some Whoopers, show very pale grey 'clouding' in the otherwise white plumage. This young Whooper Swan is typically pale grey and can also be identified by the characteristic bill shape and pattern. The pale patch is wedge-shaped and reaches forward to below the nostril but, unlike the pure yellow of an adult, it is a dull yellowish-white.



WIL LEURS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

THIRTEEN: Juvenile Bewick's Swan (Weesp, The Netherlands, 26 January 2008). This young Bewick's Swan can also be aged by its grey 'clouded' plumage. Its identity as a Bewick's Swan can be confirmed by its rather compact shape and short neck, slightly concave culmen and small, rather circular pale yellow bill patch.

# Find your own Mute, Whooper and Bewick's Swans

Mute Swan is ubiquitous on almost any lowland water body, even many ponds. Having colonised Shetland in 1992, it is now present over the whole of Britain bar the highest moors and mountains. It is easy to see, but in winter a sizeable number of birds leave their breeding territories and pitch up on marshes and farmland, where they form flocks which expand into double figures and often mingle freely with Whooper and Bewick's Swans. Views are often distant and an eye for subtle features and jizz is needed to pick out the scarcer two 'wild' swans.

Whooper Swan breeds in very low numbers in a few areas of the northern Highlands and Orkney, Shetland and the Outer Hebrides, with two or three pairs also in southern England which are believed to originate from injured birds, paired off and remaining to breed after their compatriots have departed. It is overwhelmingly a wintering species, with a bias toward the northern two-thirds of Britain, and most of our birds originate from Iceland. Internationally important sites for good numbers of this species in winter include the Ouse Washes – particulary Welney WWT (TL 5494) – Martin Mere WWT (SD 4214) and the rest of the Ribble Estuary, Lancashire, Caerlaverock NNR (NY 0365), Dumfries and Galloway, and the Lower Derwent Valley NNR (SE 6939), North Yorkshire, though occasional stragglers will get as far south as Walland Marsh (TQ 9923) in Kent.

Bewick's Swan originates in Siberia, doesn't breed at all in Britain and is scarcer overall than Whooper. It has a more southerly winter distribution, but can be found at many of the same sites as Whooper in England; very few winter in Scotland. In the west, the upper reaches of the Severn estuary are key, particularly Slimbridge Wetland Centre WWT (SO 7204), Gloucestershire, while the core wintering area is in East Anglia, centering on the Ouse Washes.

# Common and King Eider

Words by Keith Vinicombe

REBECCA NASON (WWW.REBECCANASON.COM)

ONE: Common Eider (Mousa, Shetland, 1 November 2008). Common Eiders are gregarious birds. There are two subspecies in Britain: nominate *mollissima* is widespread and has a population of just over 17,000, but birds in Shetland (about 3,000) are now grouped with *faeroeensis*, from the Faroes and southern Iceland. Both populations are declining in Britain, as they are elsewhere in northern Europe. A wide range of theories suggested to explain this includes diminishing food supplies, climate change and thiamine deficiency (Holt et al 2012).

Common Eider is a familiar sight around the coasts of Britain and Ireland, particularly in winter. Among the black, white and brown rafts may lurk surprises, however – not just a rare King Eider, but perhaps even one of the vagrant subspecies of Common. Keith Vinicombe discusses their field identification.

# Basic Principles

Common Eider is a widespread and numerous seaduck, most notably found along northern English, Scottish and Irish coasts year round. Parties of non-breeding birds, including young males in motley piebald plumages, may linger well south of nesting areas during the summer, and it is such birds and the brown females which are closer in appearance to the respective plumages of the Arctic-breeding King Eider, a rare but annual visitor to Britain.

Identification is further complicated by the outside chance of vagrant subspecies of Common Eider, notably so-called Northern Eider *Somateria mollissima borealis*, and even Dresser's Eider *S m dresseri*, recorded recently for the first time in Ireland. On current knowledge these forms are only identifiable as adult males, so it is this plumage on which we focus here.

### Common Eider

This species breeds around the coasts of Scotland and north-east England, as well as in northern Ireland. In winter it is much more widespread around the English and Welsh coasts, but it becomes increasingly scarce and localised towards the south. It is extremely rare inland.

It is a large, bulky seaduck with a strikingly wedge-shaped head and bill profile. It dives with a characteristic open-wing action. In flight it appears fat and heavy with rather short, broad-based wings, a short neck and a large wedge-shaped head, which is often held low, contributing to a hump-backed impression. Common Eiders usually fly low over the sea in lines or disorganised bunches. They are often very confiding.

From their first autumn, juvenile males start to acquire variable amounts of adult-like feathering, with black appearing on the head, back, scapulars and flanks, but a speckled brown juvenile belly is retained. Most distinctive is a gradually developing white breast. The bill becomes a dull lime green and a pale stripe curves back from the bill and over the eye. By their first summer, they usually show a completely white breast and white feathering on the back and scapulars. Second-winter males are much more like adults, but usually retain slight traces of immaturity.

Eclipse males are easily separated from females, appearing uniformly dull black (browner on the breast), but retaining extensive white in the wing coverts and, when not moulted, the tertials.

### Northern Eider

The eiders occurring in Britain and Ireland are of the nominate subspecies, although on Shetland and Orkney birds are considered to be closer to *faeroeensis*. This, as its name implies, breeds in the Faroe Islands, but males of this form are similar to the nominate.

These forms are replaced in the Arctic by the northern *borealis*, which breeds from Franz Joseph Land and Spitzbergen west to Iceland, Greenland and north-eastern Canada.

Most *borealis* are not safely separable from *mollissima* and *faeroeensis*, but birds from western Greenland and Baffin Island can be distinguished by their bright orange-yellow frontal lobes, bill, legs and feet (dull greeny-grey in nominate). They also show two small triangular white 'sails' on their back, which are stiff modified scapulars, similar to those shown by male King Eider. The identification of vagrant subspecies is, however, inevitably clouded by the existence of intergrades.

### Dresser's Eider

The subspecies *dresseri* breeds in North America from Maine to Labrador, and a male of this form was seen in Co Donegal, Ireland, in 2011.

This Nearctic form is surprisingly distinctive, having a rather short-looking bill and a high, steep forehead with a strong peak on the forecrown. Most distinctive, however, are the broad, rounded frontal lobes that almost reach the eye, most noticeable when seen head on. In nominate Common Eider, these lobes are narrower and much more pointed (although some *borealis* types have been seen with slightly rounded lobes). On Dresser's, the lobes vary in colour from greyish through greenish to bright orange.

Dresser's also shows a line of green running horizontally below the black cap, while a less obvious difference is that the black line that borders the lobes is narrower and not as wedge shaped as on Common. Like Northern Eider, this form also shows white sails on the scapulars (Garner 2008).

### King Eider

This is a rare but regular visitor from the Arctic, mainly in winter. Inevitably, most occur in Scotland, with almost 70 per cent having occurred in eastern Scotland, from Shetland to the Firth of Forth. The species remains very rare in England and there is just one record from Wales. About 80 per cent of British records relate to males (Fraser *et al* 2007).

King Eider is slightly smaller, shorter billed, squarer headed and more compact than Common Eider, and males have a distinctive large and colourful frontal shield over the bill (reduced in first-winters and eclipse).

Like Common, juvenile male Kings moult almost continuously through their first winter, but the rate at which they acquire adult-like features varies individually. They gradually show a sooty-black head and body, a white breast, a variable whitish rear flank patch and an orange-yellow base to a pink bill (by spring, the base may start to swell into a yellow shield). Many also show white on the throat and fore-neck, separated from the white breast by a blackish neck ring. All such birds retain a heavily mottled brown juvenile belly.

In their second winter, males become much more adult like, but they are still readily distinguished by the smaller shield, a darker grey crown, whitish rather than pale green cheeks, and the lack of a pink flush to the breast. They can be separated from exceptionally advanced first-winters by their black belly and at least partially white upperwing coverts, which are not fully acquired until their second winter.

By the end of the winter, they are even more like adults, but can still be distinguished by the slightly smaller shield and the presence of a thin black vertical line down the centre of the nape. In early summer, males show a great deal of variation as they go into eclipse.

First-years moult first, followed by males that have failed to breed and then by breeding males (Ellis 1994, Dawson 1994). In eclipse, males show a black body, a messy blackish head, a dingy whitish breast and a white wing-covert patch (usually obvious when diving), and adults retain a dull red bill (shorter than Common) with a somewhat shrunken orange shield.

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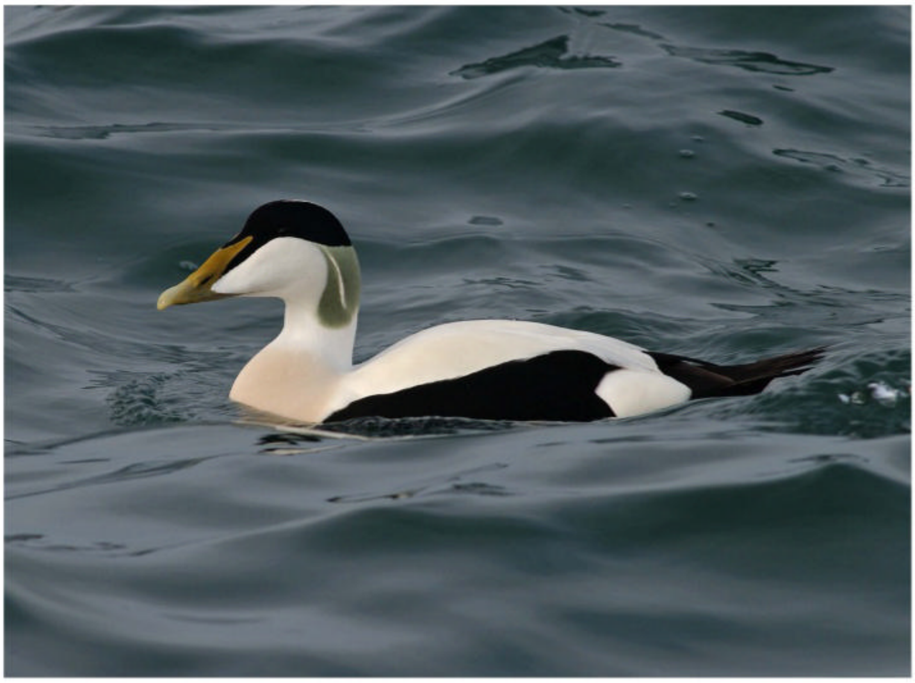
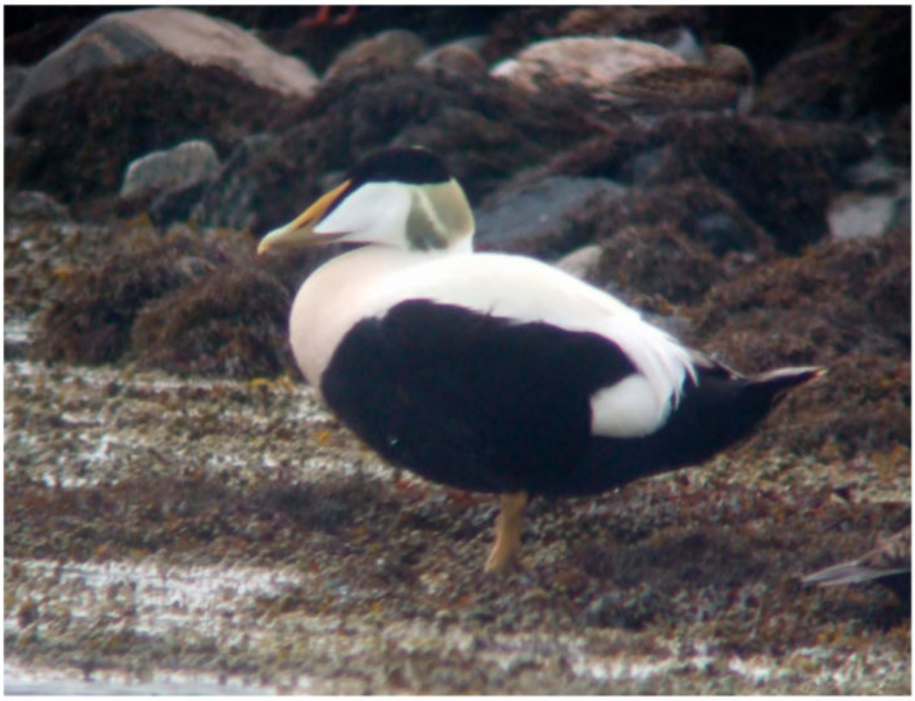


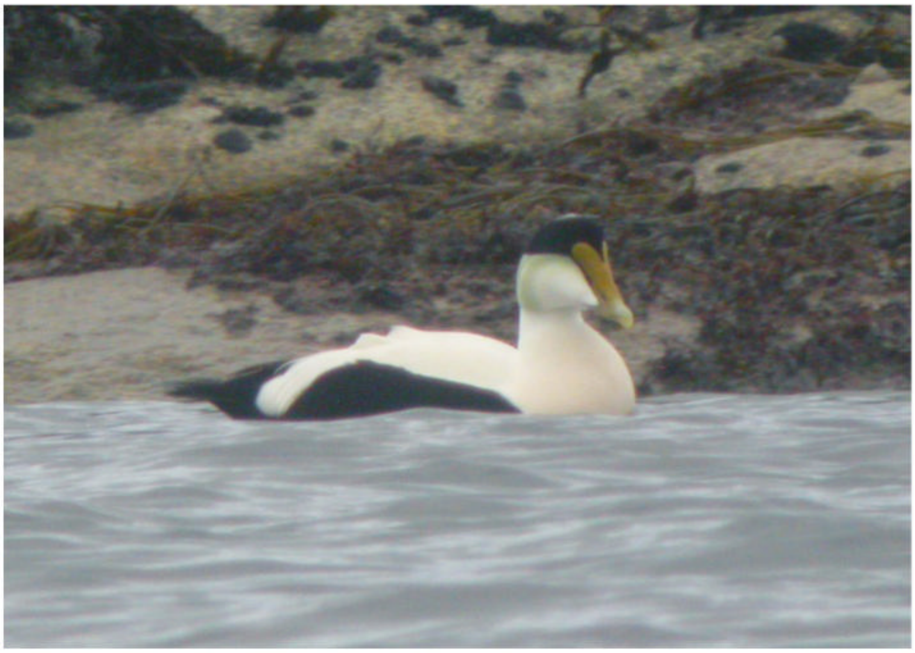
TWO: Common Eider (adult male, Peterhead, Aberdeenshire, 11 February 2005). With their immaculate black-and-white plumage, salmon-tinted breast and lime green nape patch, adult males are positively stunning. British breeding birds have a grey-green bill and narrow, pointed frontal lobes which are green or dark yellow, like this bird. Their legs are rather an insipid grey-green. Common Eiders also have a very distinctive shape, with a fat, bulky body and a strikingly wedge-shaped head and bill profile. Males give a rather comical cooing call, *oo-OO-oo*, rising on the middle syllable. They dive with a characteristic open-wing action.

STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

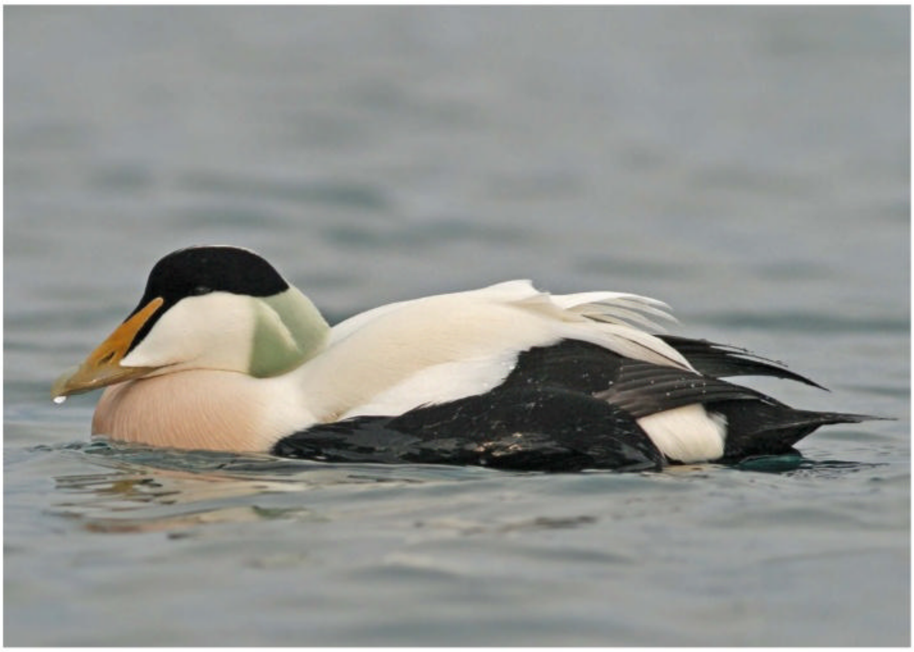


THREE: Common Eider (adult male, resembling subspecies *borealis*, Benbecula, Outer Hebrides, 24 May 2010). From north-eastern Canada to north-western Russia, nominate *mollissima* is replaced by the northern *borealis*. Most birds are unlikely to stand out from nominate, but drakes from Baffin Island and western Greenland are distinctive, having bright orange-yellow bill, frontal lobes, legs and feet. In addition, they show small white triangular 'sails' on their back (stiff, modified scapulars, similar to those shown by male King Eider) and strongly decurved tertials. Also, the feathering on the lores does not extend past the base of the nostril.

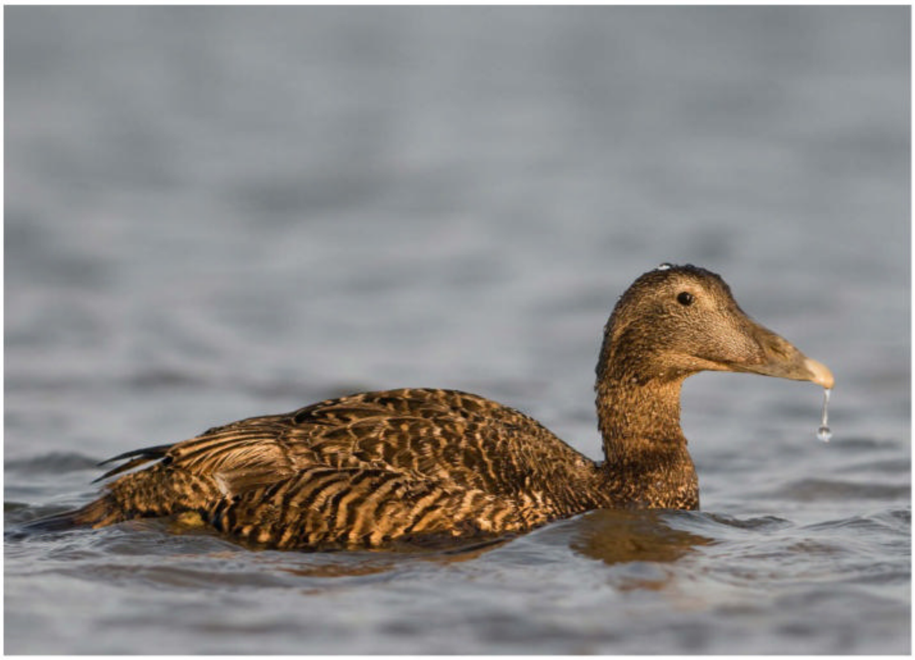
KEITH VINICOMBE


CRAIG SHAW

FOUR: Common Eider (adult male, subspecies *dresseri*, Glassagh Bay, Donegal, 14 February 2010). Common Eiders in north-eastern North America from Labrador to Maine are of the subspecies *dresseri* and differ from the nominate. Most distinctive are the large rounded frontal lobes that extend back almost to the eye. They vary in colour from greyish through greenish to bright orange. In a side-on view, this form shows a shorter bill (sometimes with a distinct kink near the tip) and a steep, highly peaked forehead. In addition, a line of green runs back horizontally below the black cap. Although there is a single Irish record, this form has not yet occurred in Britain.

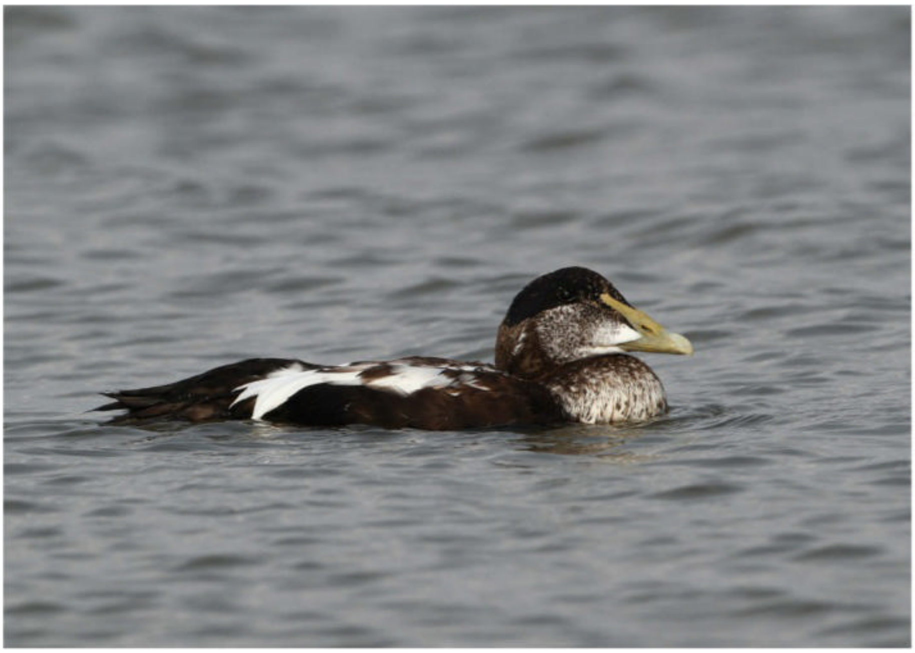

STEFAN PFÜTZKE

FIVE: Common Eider (adult male, subspecies *borealis*, Varanger, Norway, 8 March 2012). Although European *borealis* are difficult to separate from the nominate, some, like this individual, can be identified by a combination of their orange-yellow frontal lobes and the two distinctive 'sails' on the scapulars, as well as the curved tertials (females also show the sails). Like this bird, some have a squarer head with a more vertical forehead. Note also that the feathering on the lores only just reaches the nasal aperture. A minor feature is that the black cap may show a straighter lower edge.


HAN BOUWMEESTER (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

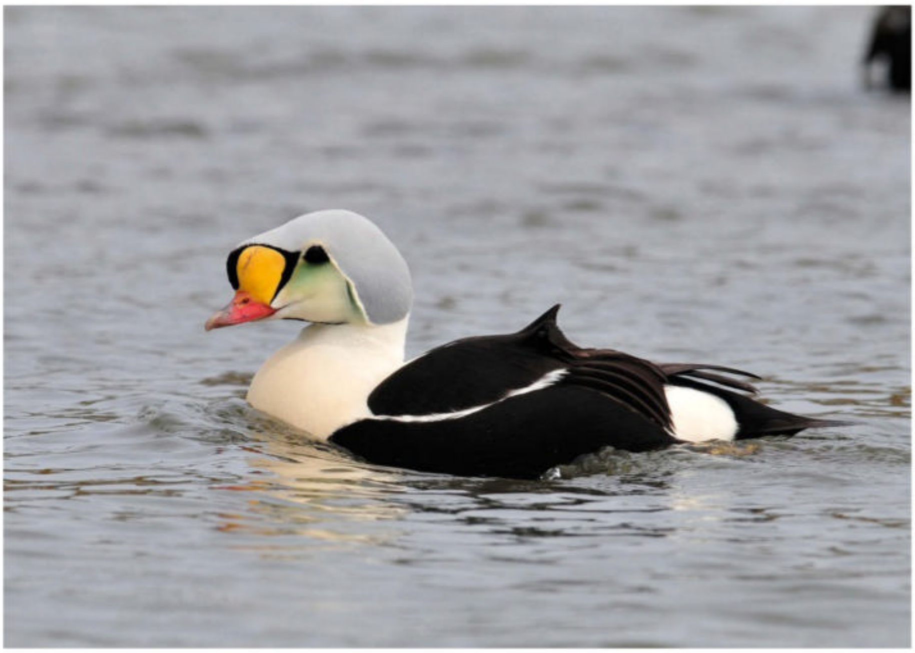
SIX: Common Eider (female, Farne Islands, Northumberland, 10 June 2008). Female Common Eiders are brown, profusely blotched, barred and mottled with dark brown. The dark eye stands out on a rather bland, subtly mottled face, which also shows a faint pale eyebrow. Note also the long, rather pointed lobe of loral feathering extending into the bill base. This particular individual is heavily worn and abraded, prior to its late summer moult. When fresh, they are smart and immaculate, with delicate ginger and even rufous tones. Juveniles are similar, but are blacker and rather oily, their immaculate plumage being subtly and finely scalloped with dark buff.

SEVEN: Common Eider (male in eclipse, Wilhelmshaven, Germany, 11 September 2010). In eclipse, male Common Eiders become very dark, blackish-brown (appearing distinctly oily looking), but they retain extensive and prominent areas of white on the wing coverts and, before they are moulted, the tertials. Note, however, that first-summer males remain dark on the forewing. Like females, they also show a ghost of a buff eyebrow and retain a contrasting grey-green bill. Moulting birds in late summer tend to sit around for long periods, doing very little. Inevitably, they generally look pretty scruffy at this time of year.



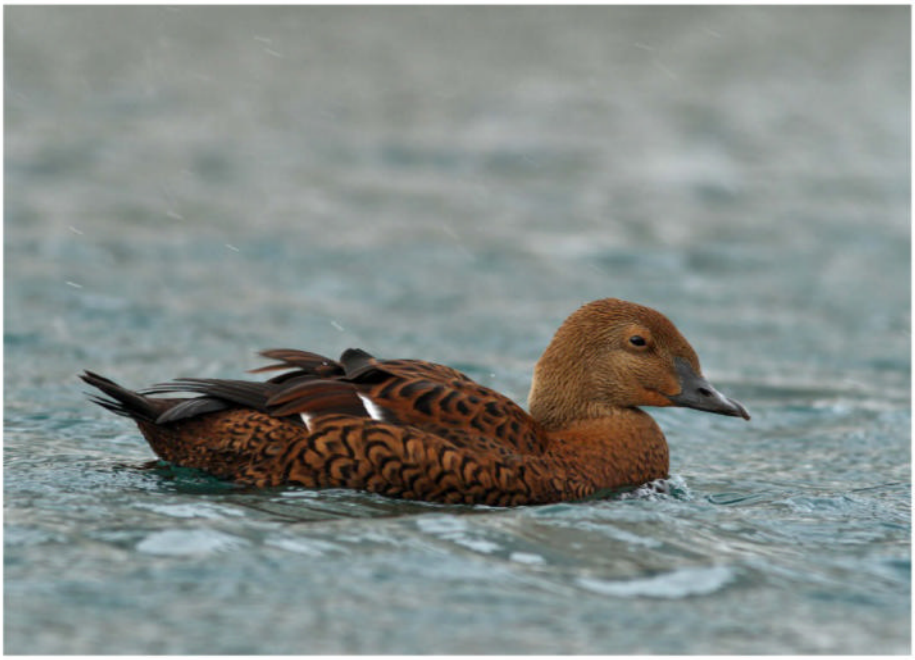
STEFAN PFÜZKE

EIGHT: King Eider (adult male, Sands of Forvie, Aberdeenshire, 24 May 2010). Male King Eider is a stunningly attractive and unmistakable bird. Structurally, it is slightly smaller, more compact, shorter billed and squarer headed than Common, but the most obvious structural differences are its large frontal shield and small red bill (but keep in mind that the former is reduced in size in both first-winter and second-winter birds and also in eclipse). Note also the prominent black sails on the scapulars. Unlike Common Eider, which has completely white leading wing coverts, male King Eider has the white restricted to a discrete oblong mid-wing panel.

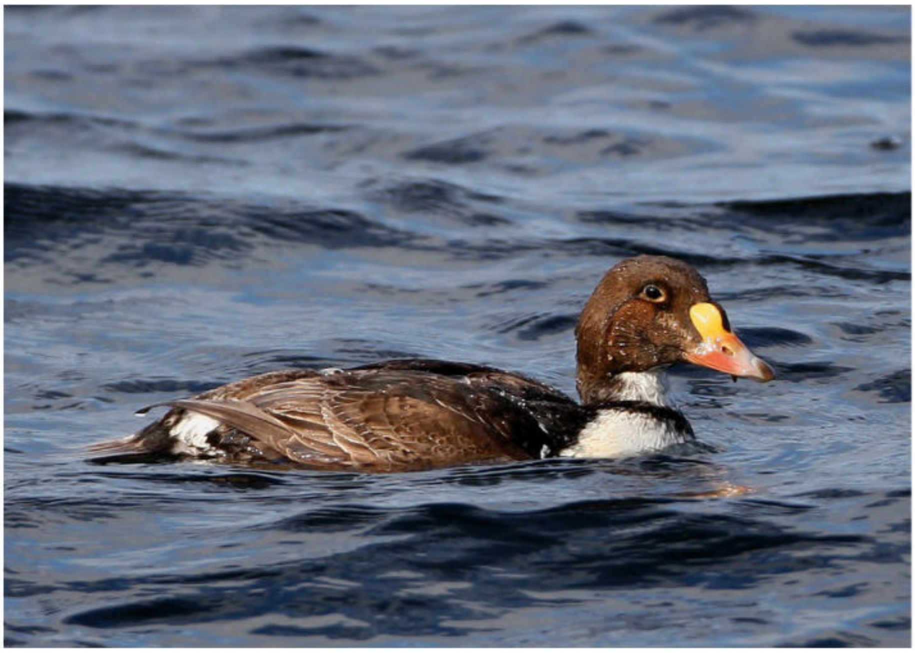


ALAN J SINCLAIR

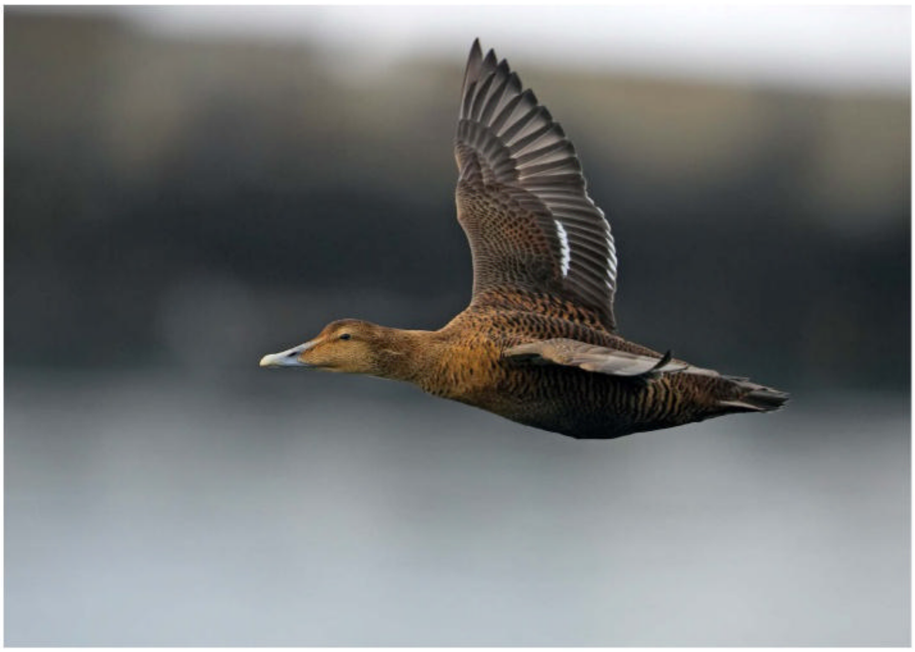
NINE: King Eider (adult female, Varanger, Norway, 9 March 2012). The most obvious differences from female Common are structural: it is distinctly smaller and more compact, with a smaller bill and a squarer head. Whereas female Common has a long, pointed wedge of feathering intruding into the bill base, on female King Eider this is shorter and distinctly rounded at the tip. Two other features are the diffuse pale eyering and the gape line, which is often upcurved, producing a distinctive 'smiling' expression. The general plumage tone is dark orangey-brown, with thick fringes to the black scapular feathers and heavily scalloped flanks.



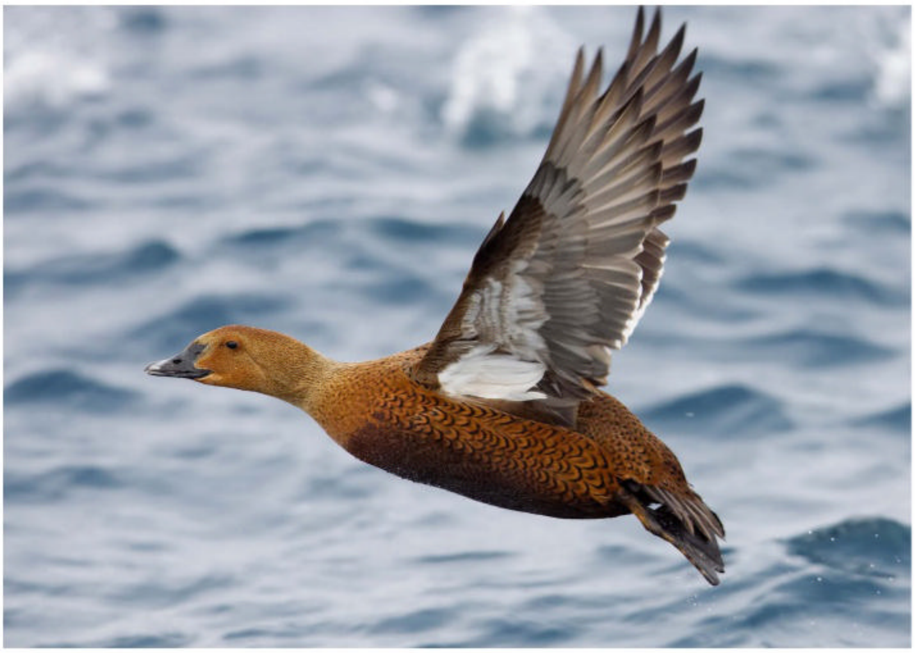
STEFAN PFÜZKE


JIM NICOLSON

TEN: King Eider (first-summer male, Sandwick, Shetland, 8 May 2010). Like Common Eider, juvenile male King Eider moults almost continuously through its first winter. It gradually shows a dark chocolate brown or sooty black head and body and a variable whitish rear flank patch, as well as a white breast which is separated from the white neck by a thick brown ring. Such birds retain a heavily mottled juvenile belly and completely brown upperwing coverts. Most distinctive, however, is the gradually developing adult bill colouring and prominent yellow frontal shield. Their post-juvenile moult ends when they moult into eclipse later in the summer.

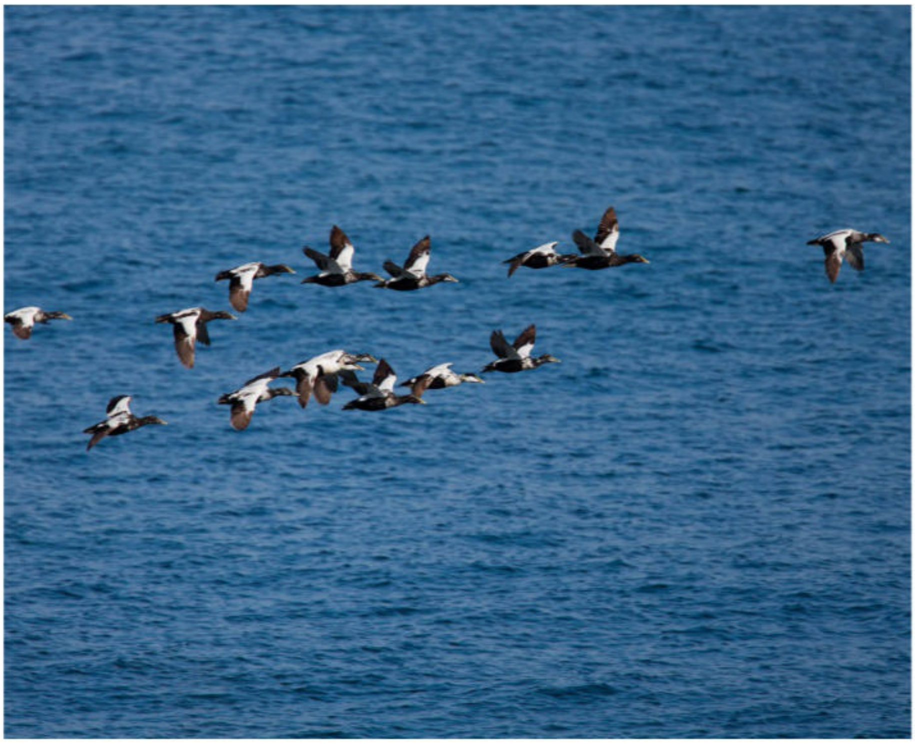

MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

ELEVEN: Common Eider (female, Vardö, Norway, 4 April 2006). Plumage-wise, female Common Eider may suggest female Mallard but, in flight, the combination of the fat, bulky body, short neck, wedge-shaped head and bill profile and relatively short, broad-based wings is distinctive. The fulvous brown body plumage is immaculately mottled and barred with black, but the most distinctive features are the pale greeny-grey bill and the white borders to the speculum which, like the primaries, is black. Note that the dark and oily juveniles show only inconspicuous dark buff tips to the greater coverts and secondaries.


MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

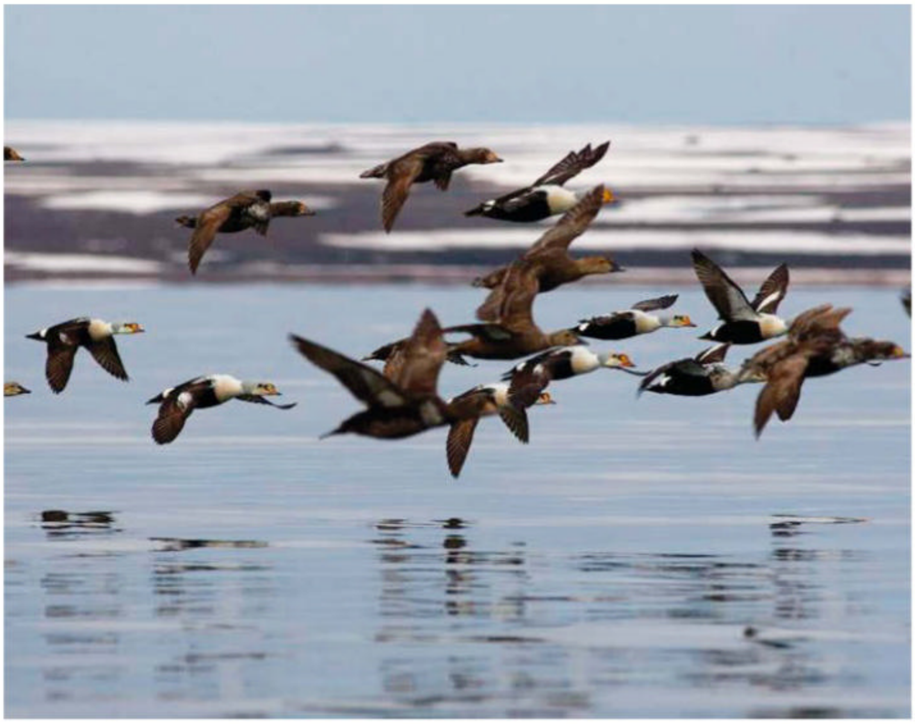
TWELVE: King Eider (female, Vardö, Norway, 5 April 2006). Although rather bulky in the body, King Eider is distinctly short necked in flight, with a more rounded, less wedge-shaped head profile. This excellent flight shot also shows the rounded lobe of feathering protruding into the base of the bill, not extending in a point as it does in female Common Eider. Juvenile King Eiders are somewhat browner than the orangey adult females and they show only a narrow white border to the front and rear of the speculum (thicker on adult female). This difference may be readily apparent as they open their wings to dive.

THIRTEEN: Common Eiders (adult males, Seahouses, Northumberland, 22 June 2009). Common Eiders typically fly low over the sea in disorganised bunches. These birds are at various stages of moult into eclipse, some having already acquired their predominantly oily blackish eclipse head and body feathering; others are intermediate and one or two are still in virtually full plumage. All show the distinctive white leading wing coverts that contrast strongly with the rest of the plumage. Male eiders of all species acquire adult-like plumage in their second winter, but at that age they still retain traces of immaturity, full plumage being acquired in their third winter.



OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

FOURTEEN: King Eiders (Svalbard, 29 June 2006). This photograph shows a mixture of females and first-summer and second-summer males. The females are completely brown, while the first-summer males are uniformly blackish-brown with gradually developing frontal shields and varying amounts of white on the breast. Note that the upperwing coverts lack any white until the second winter. The second-summer males are more adult like, but with underdeveloped frontal shields and restricted and/or mottled white upperwing-covert patches. Compared with Common Eider, they all look stocky, short necked and blunt headed.



TONY MILLS (WWW.NOTJUSTBIRDS.COM)

## Find your own Common and King Eider

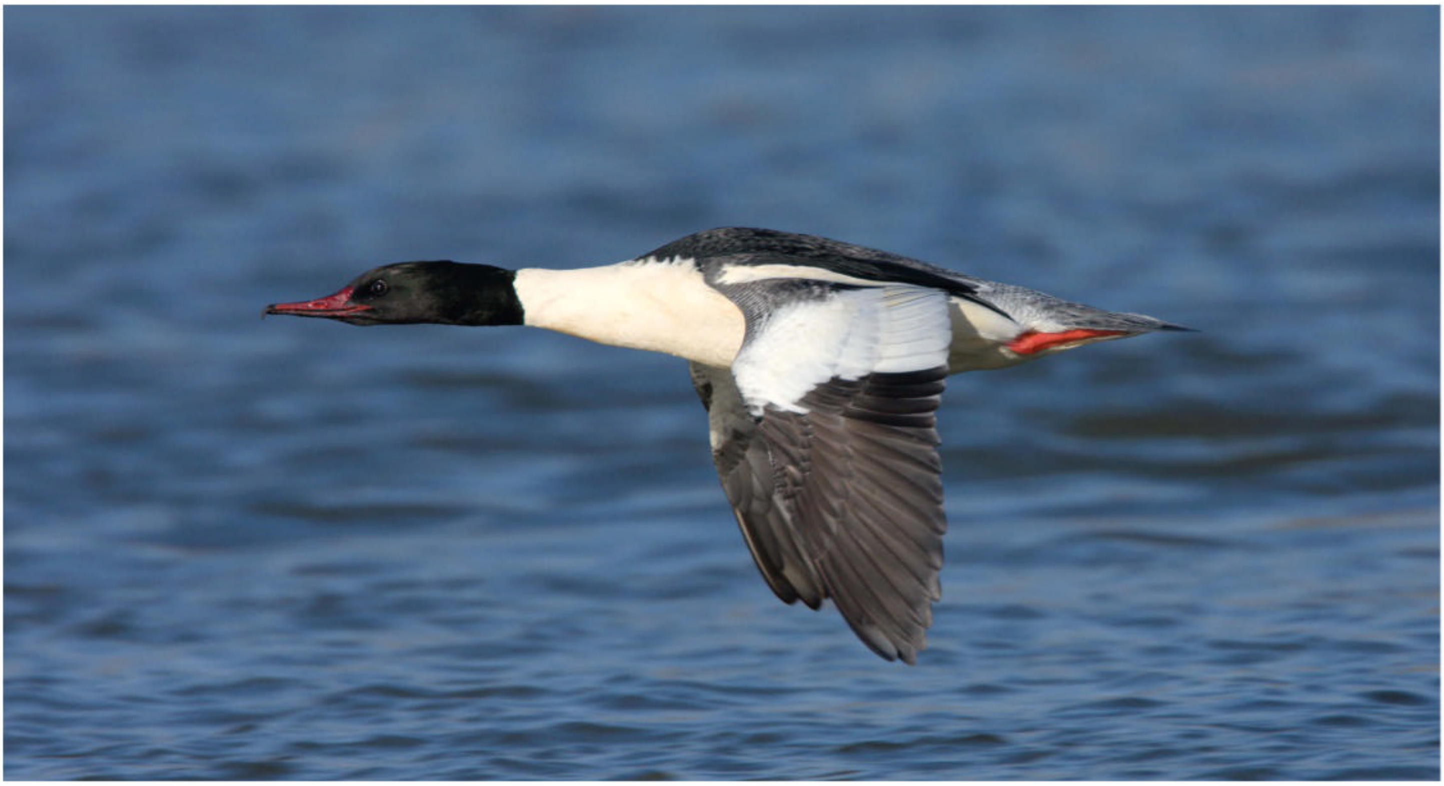
King Eider is a bona fide rarity, but can turn up almost anywhere that flocks of its commoner relative accumulate. It is more frequent in the northern half of Britain, but has turned up as far south as Suffolk and Kent in recent years. Scour eider flocks anywhere and you may get lucky, otherwise keep a keen ear to the news services.

The more outré forms of Common Eider are a much trickier ID proposition, and the west coast of Ireland is most likely to get you a dresseri or a borealis than anywhere else in Britain or Ireland.

The coast of Aberdeenshire is the best place in Britain to stand a chance of finding a borealis, but not all eiders with sails are pure examples of this form and putative intergrades have been identified.

# Red-breasted Merganser, Goosander, Smew and Hooded Merganser

Words by Andy Stoddart



RAN SCHOLS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

ONE: Goosander (Roermond Asselt, The Netherlands, 26 January 2008). Sawbills are unusual ducks, not only in their long, thin, serrated bills – which are very different from the traditional broad spatulate-shaped duck bills – but also in their highly contrasting plumages. This beautiful flying Goosander shows both these aspects to perfection.

While adult males of our four 'sawbill' duck species are very distinctive, females and immatures can sometimes be confused, particularly at a distance and when dealing with the two larger species, Red-breasted Merganser and Goosander – though there is also a chance of mixing up the occasional individual of the two smaller species, Smew and that controversial vagrant from North America, Hooded Merganser. Andy Stoddart is here to help you differentiate between both species pairs and help you confidently identify these special and aesthetically pleasing wintering ducks.

# Basic Principles

The 'sawbill' ducks are a strange group, their slim, saw-toothed bills supremely adapted to catching fish underwater. There are only six extant species in the world, four of which are on the British list. They fall logically into two species pairs: one large and the other small. The remaining two (Brazilian and Scaly-sided Mergansers) are beyond the scope of this article.

### Red-breasted Merganser

This is our most familiar sawbill. It breeds in Scotland, northern England and Wales, and is a reasonably common winterer throughout the rest of Britain, where it is almost exclusively marine, occurring in sheltered shallow inshore waters, typically in estuaries. There is also some migration in winter from continental populations. Its world range extends throughout the Holarctic, occupying both the Old and New Worlds, but there are no recognised subspecies.

This is a large, slim duck. In size and structure, it is as much like a Great Crested Grebe as other ducks. Adult males are highly distinctive with their green heads, red eyes, white collars, rusty breasts and, most striking of all, a strange thin and wispy double crest. The red bill is very fine indeed, right to the base, and even appears very slightly uptilted.

Females, young and eclipse males are much drabber, brown bodied and chestnut headed, with a gradual 'blurred' transition between the neck and the body, and, up close, a diffuse pale loral line.

### Goosander

This is the other member of the pair of large sawbills. Like Red-breasted Merganser, it has a large world range, breeding throughout the Palearctic and the Nearctic, where it occurs as a different subspecies known as 'Common Merganser'.

In Britain it is a scarce breeder on rivers in the north and west. In winter it can be found further south too, most commonly inland on lakes, reservoirs and gravel pits, where favoured sites can attract significant numbers. Compared with Red-breasted Merganser, it is much less regularly seen in coastal waters.

There is also some winter migration, with occasional large arrivals of birds fleeing hard weather in continental Europe. The North American subspecies must be a potential vagrant to Britain, but there are as yet no accepted records.

This is the largest of the British sawbills, both bigger and more robust than Red-breasted Merganser, with a larger head and thicker neck. Adult males are beautiful with their dark bottle-green heads, dark eyes and exquisitely salmon-hued underparts. The red bill is fine but deeper based than that of Red-breasted Merganser.

Females, young and eclipse males are very different, essentially similar to the equivalent plumages of Red-breasted Merganser, but the border between the chestnut head and the largely grey body is abrupt, while a neat clearly defined white chin and throat are also apparent.

### Smew

This diminutive sawbill is exclusively a winter visitor to Britain. It is confined to the Palearctic, but has a large range which extends all the way from Scandinavia in the west to the Russian Far East.

In this country it favours lakes, reservoirs and gravel pits, mainly in south-east England, but is scarce and declining. As recently as the 1970s some sites regularly held good numbers, but today the species is a scarce winter visitor anywhere. Most birds reaching Britain are 'redheads' – females or young males.

This is a very small duck, little larger than Eurasian Teal; it is neat and compact with a short and, for a sawbill, stout bill. Arguably Britain's most beautiful duck, the adult males (sometimes known as 'white nuns') are unmistakable: largely pure white but with a black back, grey flanks, vertical black lines on the fore-flanks, a little black within a short, loose crest and black 'panda eyes'.

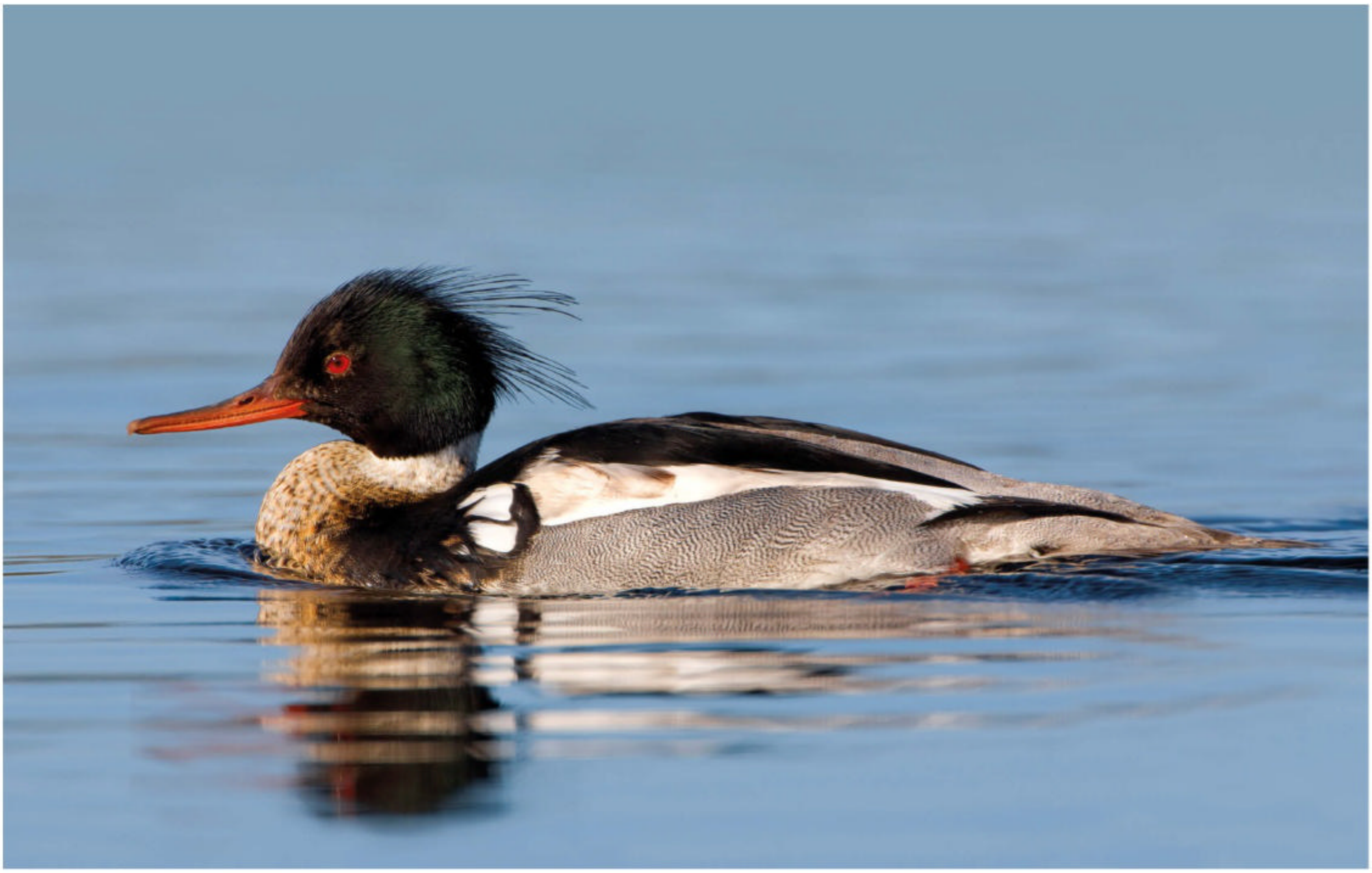
The 'redheads' are much duller – chestnut capped down to below the eye, white on the cheeks and foreneck, and grey bodied. At range, they are strangely reminiscent of a small grebe.

### Hooded Merganser

Britain's fourth sawbill is a vagrant. It has a large North American breeding range, but does not nest outside the Nearctic. Its position on the British list has always been (and remains) controversial. Though doubtless occurring here as a genuine transatlantic vagrant, many (perhaps most) occurrences relate to escapes from wildfowl collections. The problem, as ever, is disentangling the two, and in the case of this species in particular this is no easy task.

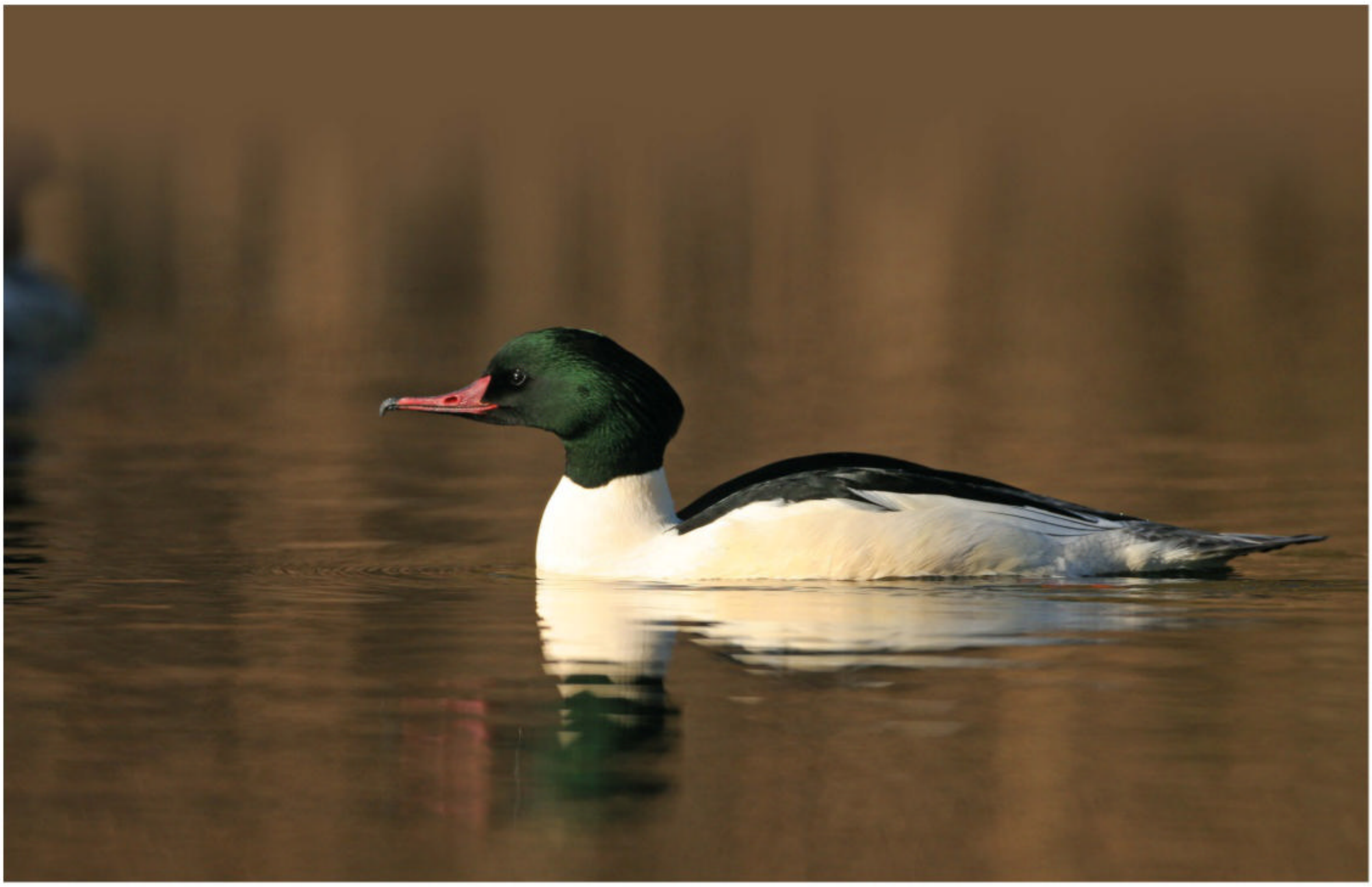
Britain's first accepted individual was on North Uist, Outer Hebrides, in 2000, since when a further seven have been accepted as wild (or at least potentially wild) birds, with three also on the books for Ireland. This is mainly a bird of freshwater habitats, and British birds have largely been on lakes, reservoirs and gravel pits.

Hooded Mergansers are also small and compact, though not as tiny and short billed as Smew. Adult males are eyecatching – a riot of chestnut, black and white. The head and upperparts are black with white-fringed scapulars and a highly distinctive white-centred Hoopoe-like crest, usually held depressed but dramatic when raised. The underparts are white, with vertical black lines on the fore-flanks and deep chestnut flanks. The eye is a bright gold. Females, young and eclipse males are drabber – chestnut-headed and brown-bodied – but also have the distinctive erectile fan-like crest.



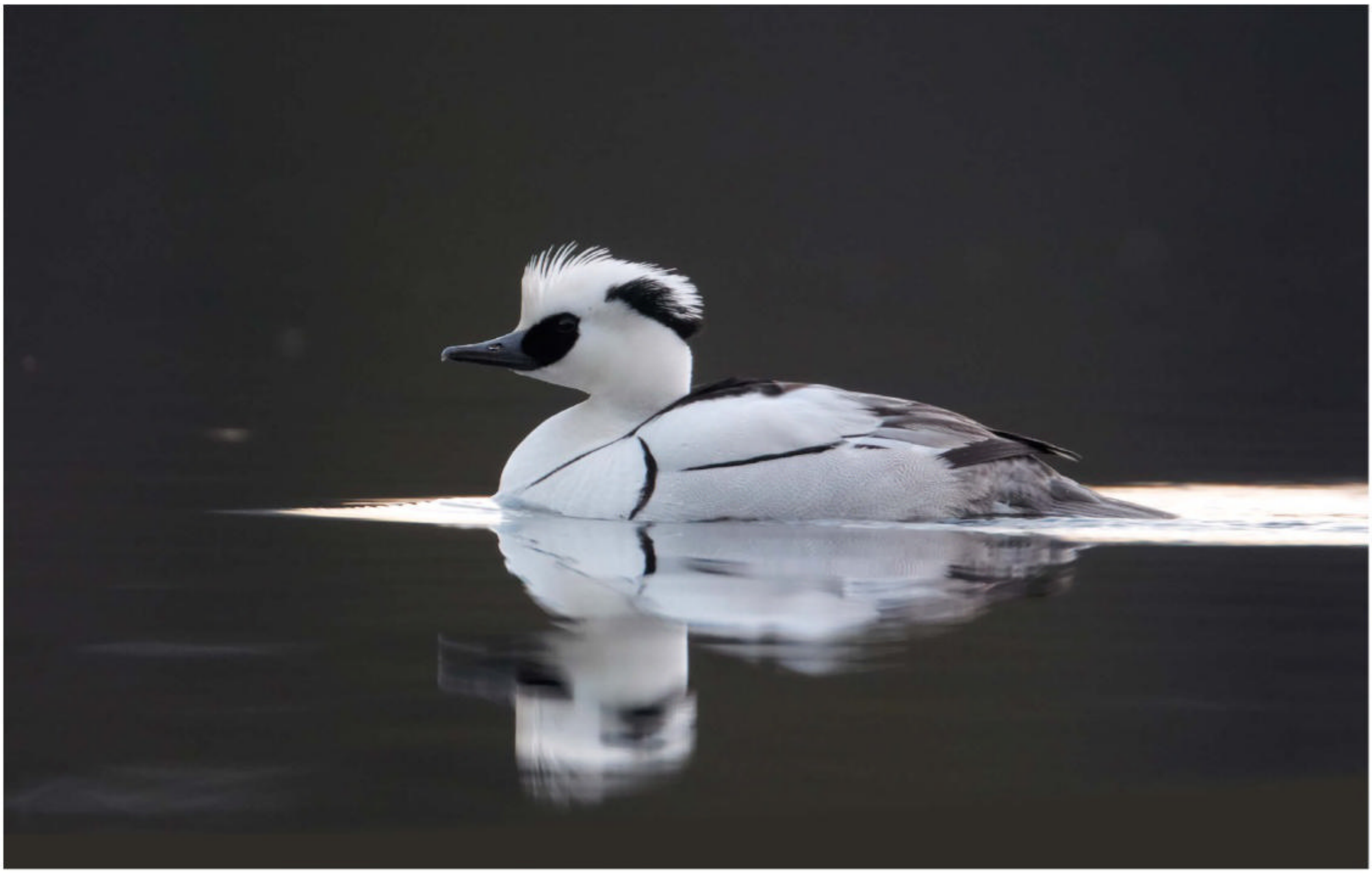
DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

TWO: Red-breasted Merganser (Kuusamo, Finland, 4 June 2008). Adult male Red-breasted Mergansers are easy to identify, but have rather complicated plumages. Note here the dark glossy green head with two wispy head plumes, white neck collar, rusty breast and black, white and grey body, all offset by bright red eyes and bill. The latter is particularly long and thin, including at the base.

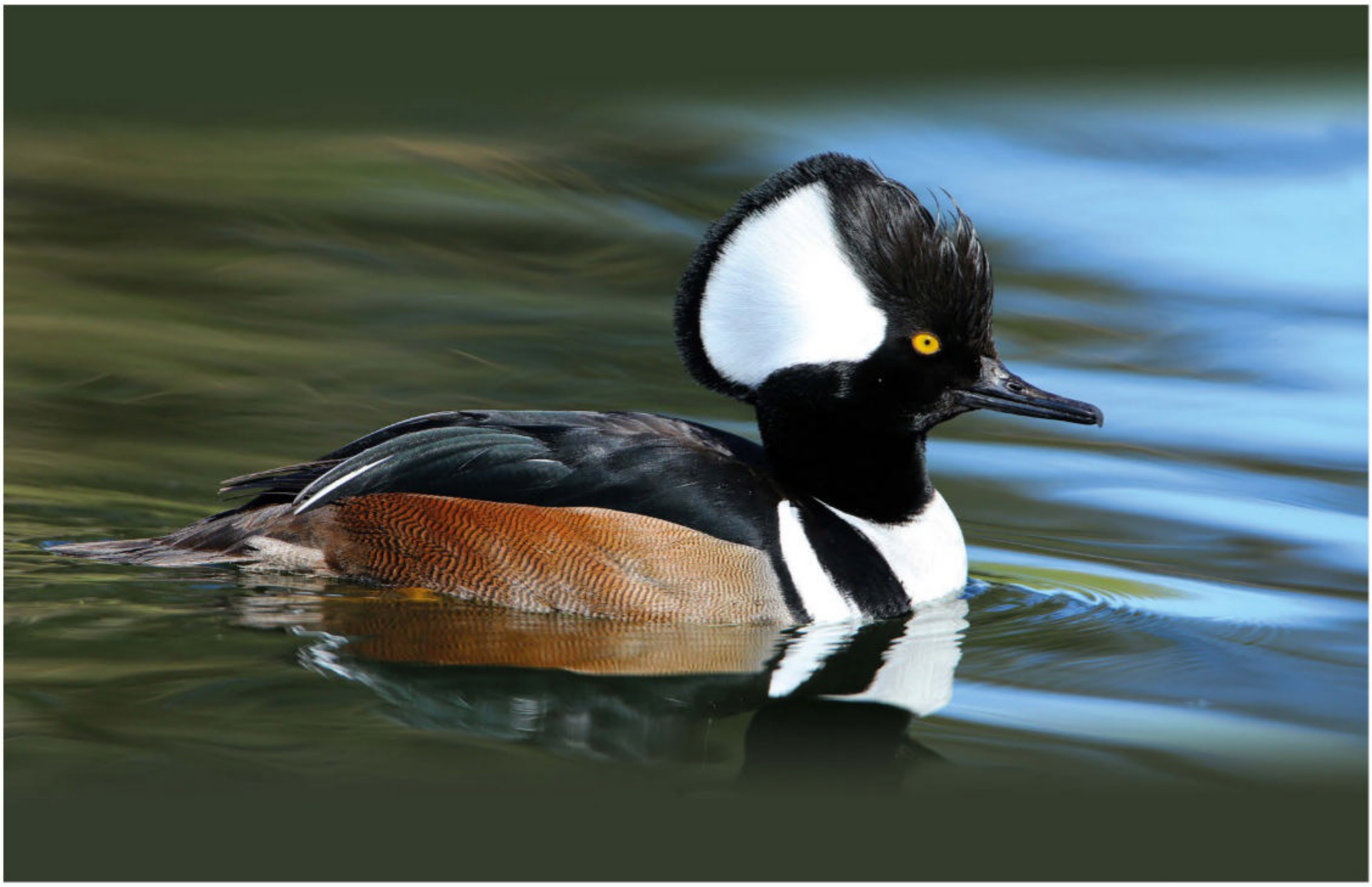


MENNO VAN DUIJN (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

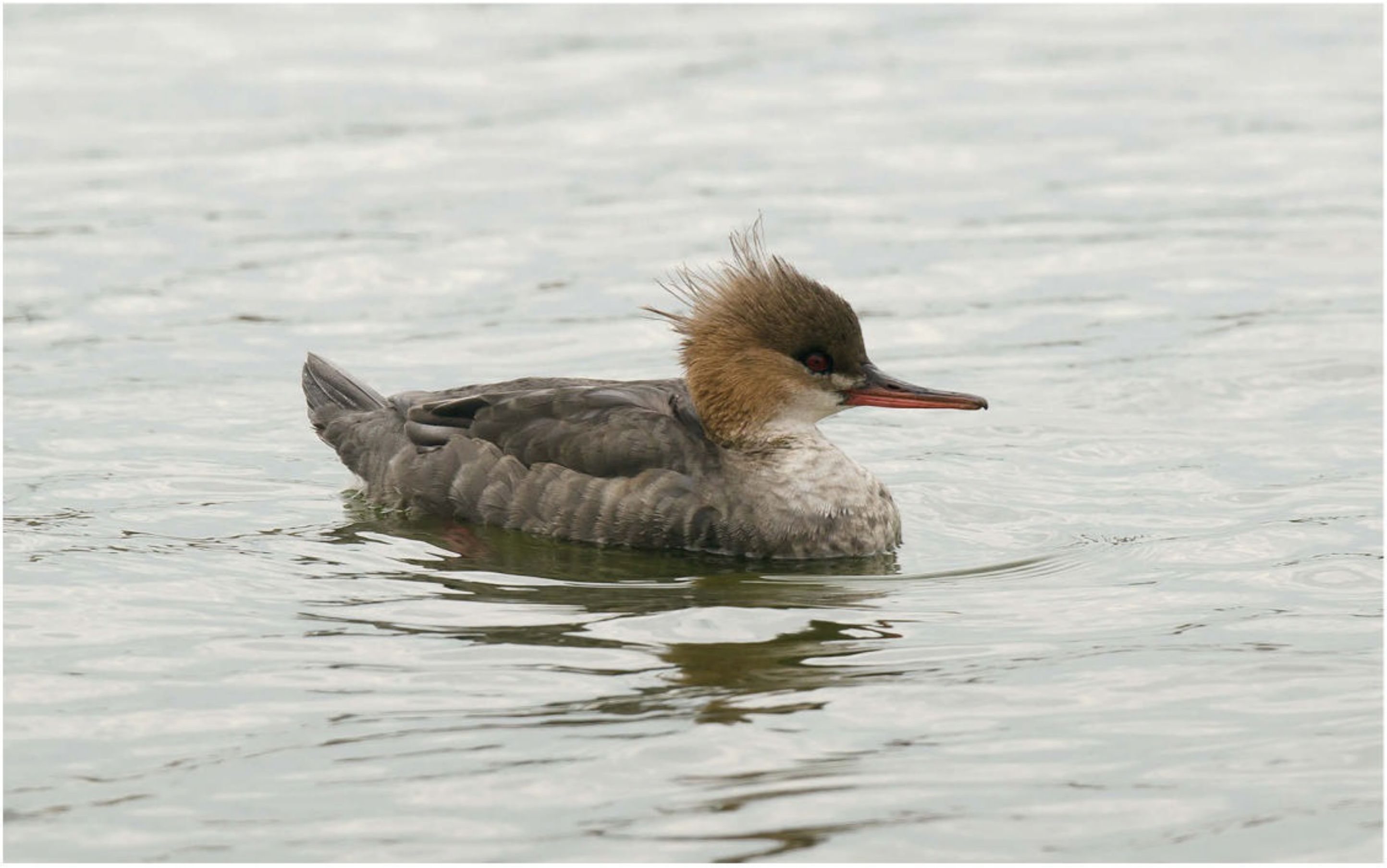
THREE: Goosander (Katwijk, The Netherlands, 3 February 2007). This adult drake Goosander looks a heavier bird than the merganser (left). It lacks any head plumes, and the bill, although also long and thin, is relatively deep at the base. The eye is also dark. The plumage is striking and much simpler than that of Red-breasted Merganser, comprising a dark green head, a dark back and beautiful salmon-flushed white underparts.


MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

FOUR: Smew (Kuusamo, Finland, 18 May 2011). Adult drake Smew is highly distinctive and perhaps our most beautiful sawbill, fully justifying its 'white nun' nickname. The bird is essentially bright white, overlain with black 'panda eyes' and black in the nape crest, on the back and in delicate pencil-thin lines on the flanks and breast-sides. Note the relatively short and dark bill compared to its larger cousins.

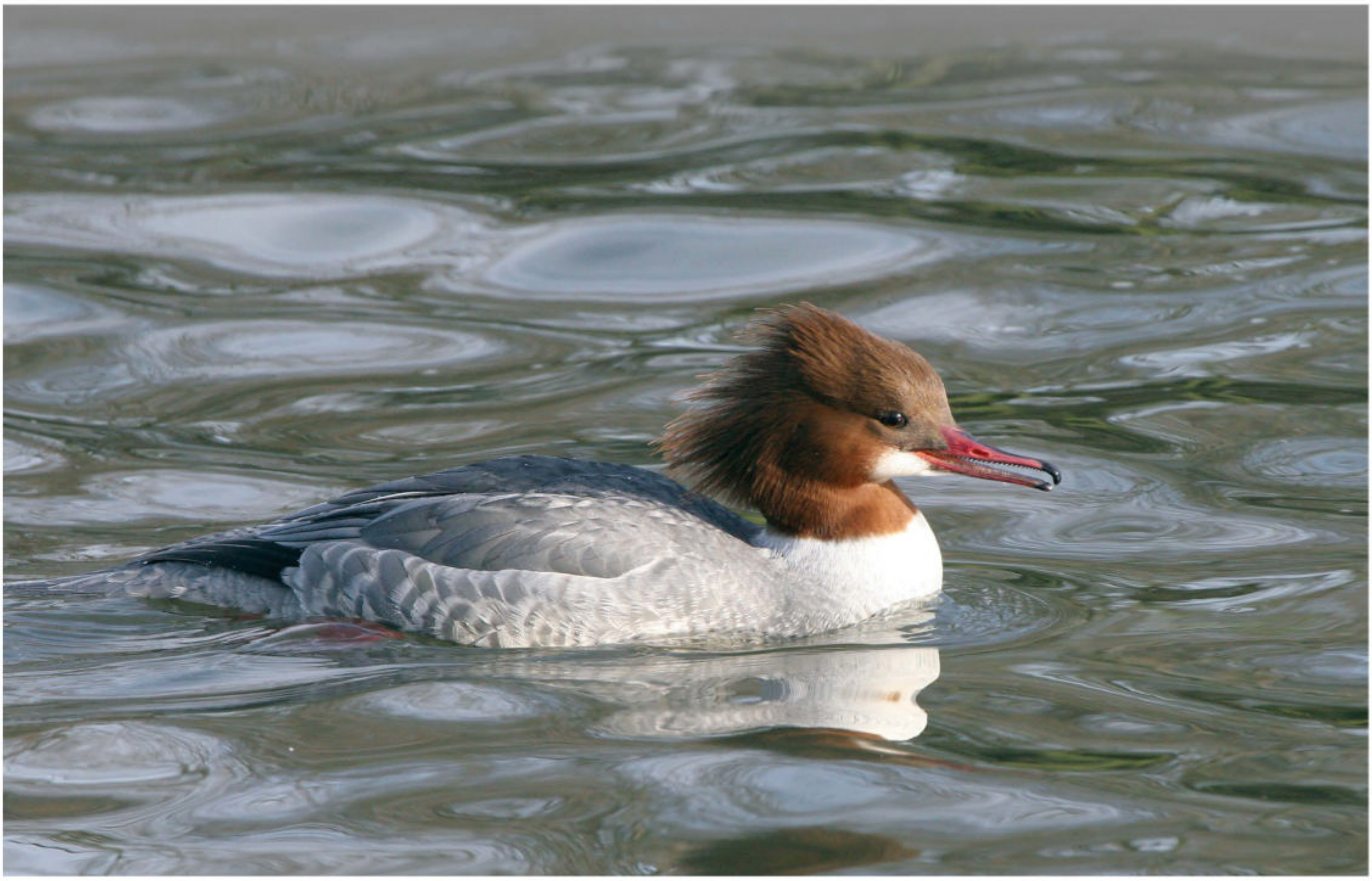

AURÉLIEN AUDEVARD

FIVE: Hooded Merganser (California, USA, 1 February 2016). Just as striking is adult drake Hooded Merganser. The plumage is an arresting combination of a black head and upperparts with a white-centred erectile nape 'fan', white on the front and sides of the breast and rich orange flanks, the latter inlaid with delicate dark vermiculations. The dark bill is similar to that of Smew, although distinctly longer, and the eye is a bright golden yellow.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

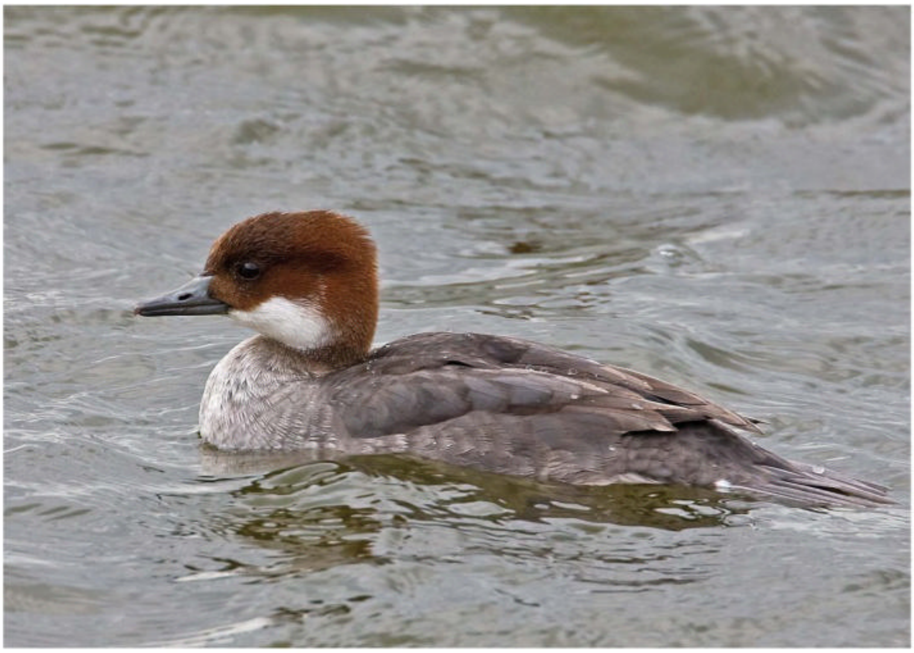
SIX: Red-breasted Merganser (Seaforth, Lancashire, 28 March 2013). Female sawbill ducks are much drabber than the drakes. This adult female Red-breasted Merganser sports a red bill and wispy rear head feathers like the male, but otherwise lacks any bright colours or adornments, and the eye is quite dull also. The head is a dull, rusty orange, weakly demarcated from the whitish foreneck and grey body. Note also the short pale loral line linking the eye and the bill.



MICHAEL ASHFORTH

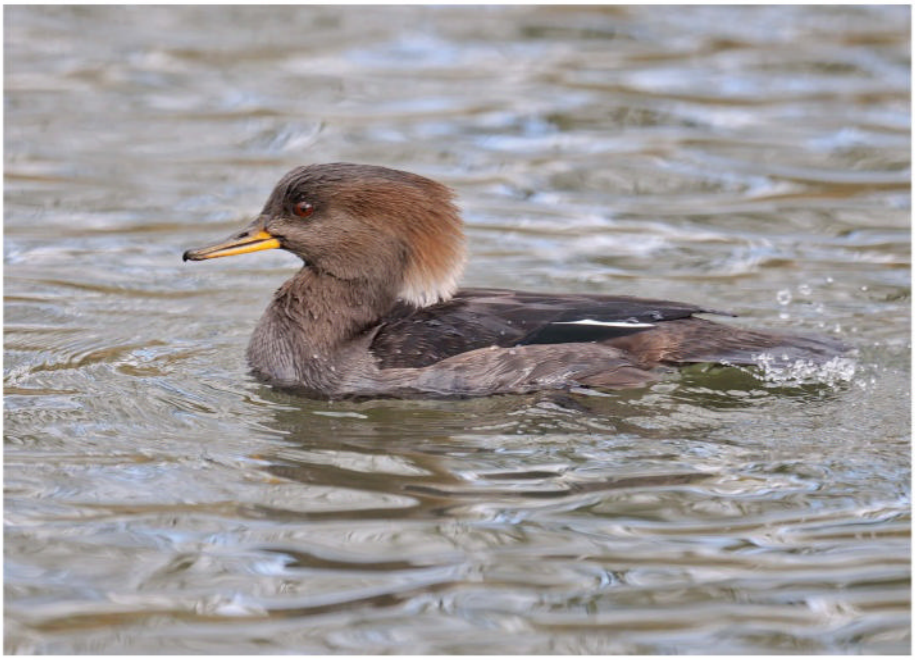
SEVEN: Goosander (Hull, East Yorkshire, 27 February 2008). Female Goosander is similarly dull, lacking any green in the head and, like Red-breasted Merganser, painted in more subtle hues of rusty orange, grey and white. However, the head pattern is sharper and more contrasting: note the neat clearly defined white throat and the sharp demarcation between the rusty orange head and white foreneck. There is also no sign of a pale loral line. The dark eye and fresh, round-tipped grey tertials with black outer fringes identify this bird as an adult.

EIGHT: Smew (Welney WWT, Norfolk, 6 March 2008). Female Smew continues the rusty orange, grey and white theme, but the head pattern is rather different, comprising a dark orange cap extending down across the lores and ear coverts and contrasting sharply with a bright white chin and throat. The rest of the body is grey. Note also the neat, compact proportions and the short, dark bill. The concolorous lores and 'fore-face' shown here (not noticeably darker than the rest of the head) indicate that this is likely to be a young bird. There are further ageing clues in the wing pattern, but these are not visible in the photo.



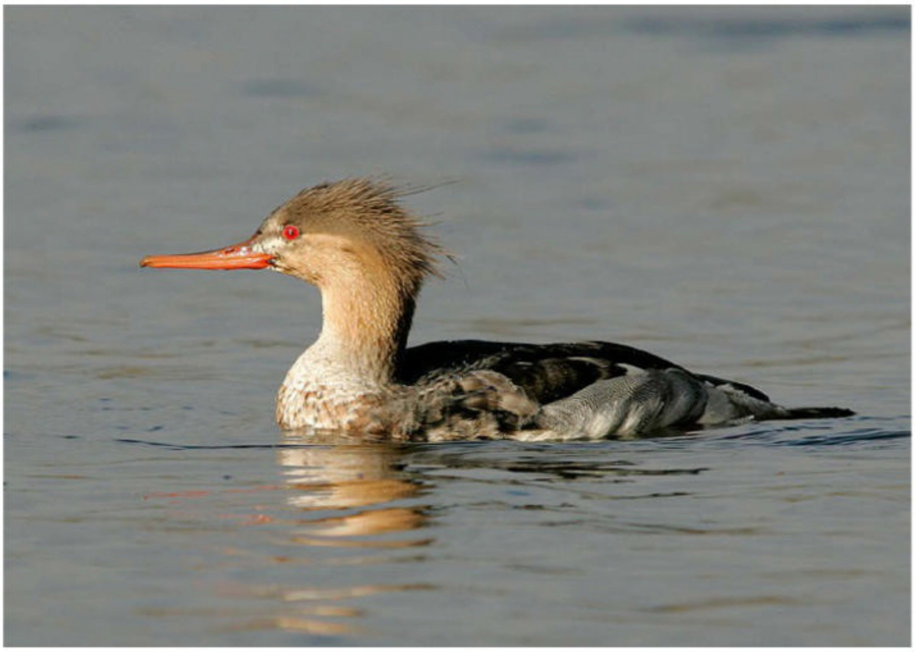
GARTH PEACOCK

NINE: Hooded Merganser (Corsham Park, Wiltshire, 25 February 2016). Female Hooded Mergansers retain the erectile nape 'fan' of the males, but the plumage is otherwise drab, again lacking bright colours and dramatic contrasts. The head, neck and flanks are washed rusty throughout, while the medium-length bill is extensively yellow and the eye is dark (the latter features both indicating a female). Ageing Hooded Mergansers can be difficult, however, with the best clues being in the wing pattern. There is perhaps a passing resemblance to Red-breasted Merganser, but note this species' rather short, compact body, much more similar to that of Smew.

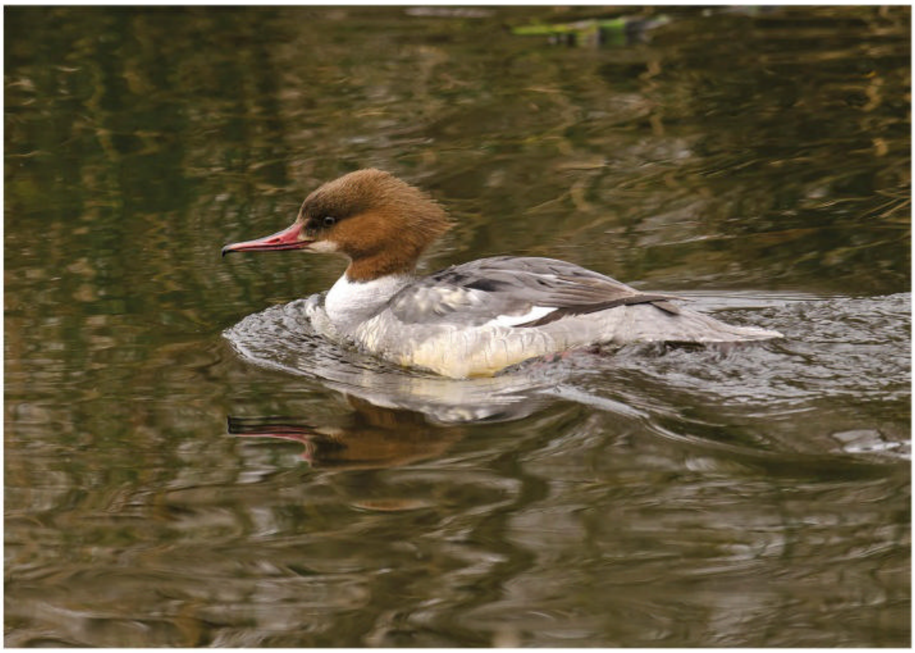


BRIAN HARRISON

TEN: Red-breasted Merganser (Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, 12 November 2011). This young male Red-breasted Merganser superficially resembles a female with its rusty orange head, diffuse neck contrasts and grey body. Note, however, the emergence of some adult male characters: some darker, green hues appearing in the head, more solid black-and-white patterning in the upperparts and a bright red eye.

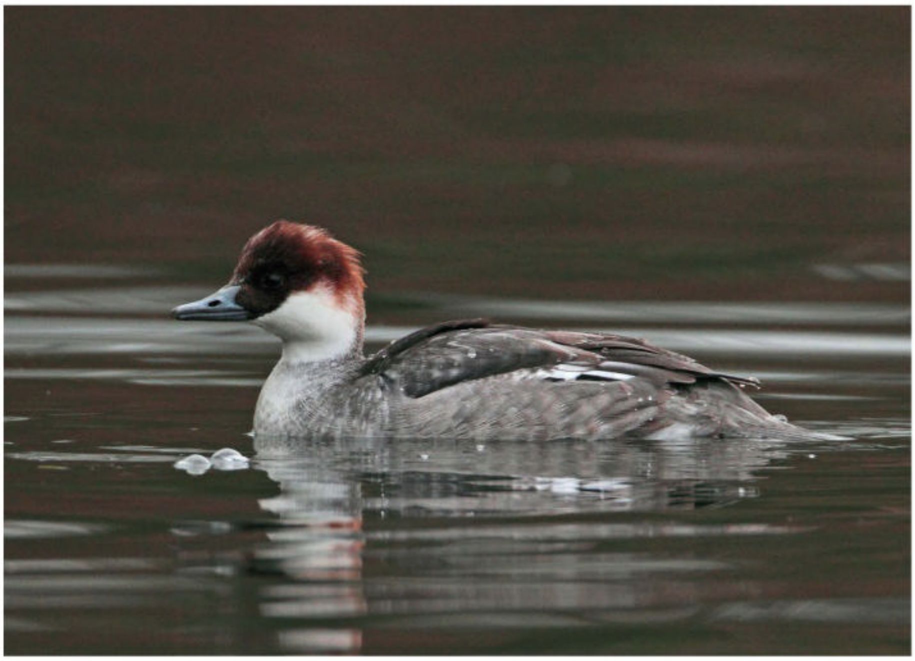


RAN SCHOLS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)



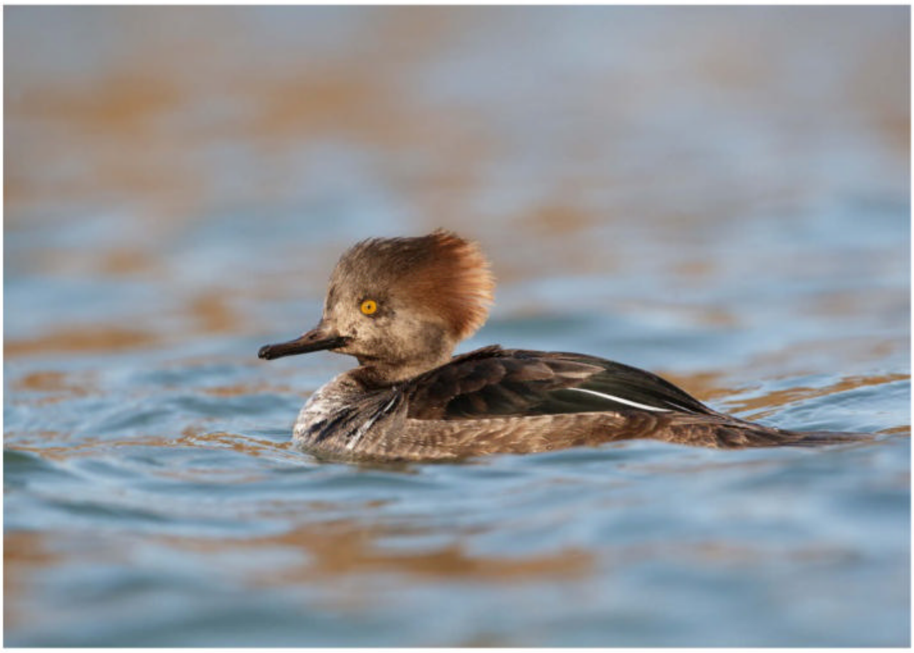
STEVE SEAL

ELEVEN: Goosander (Mere Sands Wood LWT, Lancashire, 9 March 2012). With its sharply contrasting rusty orange head and neat white throat, this Goosander closely resembles a female. However, there is some darker feathering appearing in the face, the tertials are suffused with brown and white patches are appearing in the flanks. These suggest that this bird is in fact a young male.



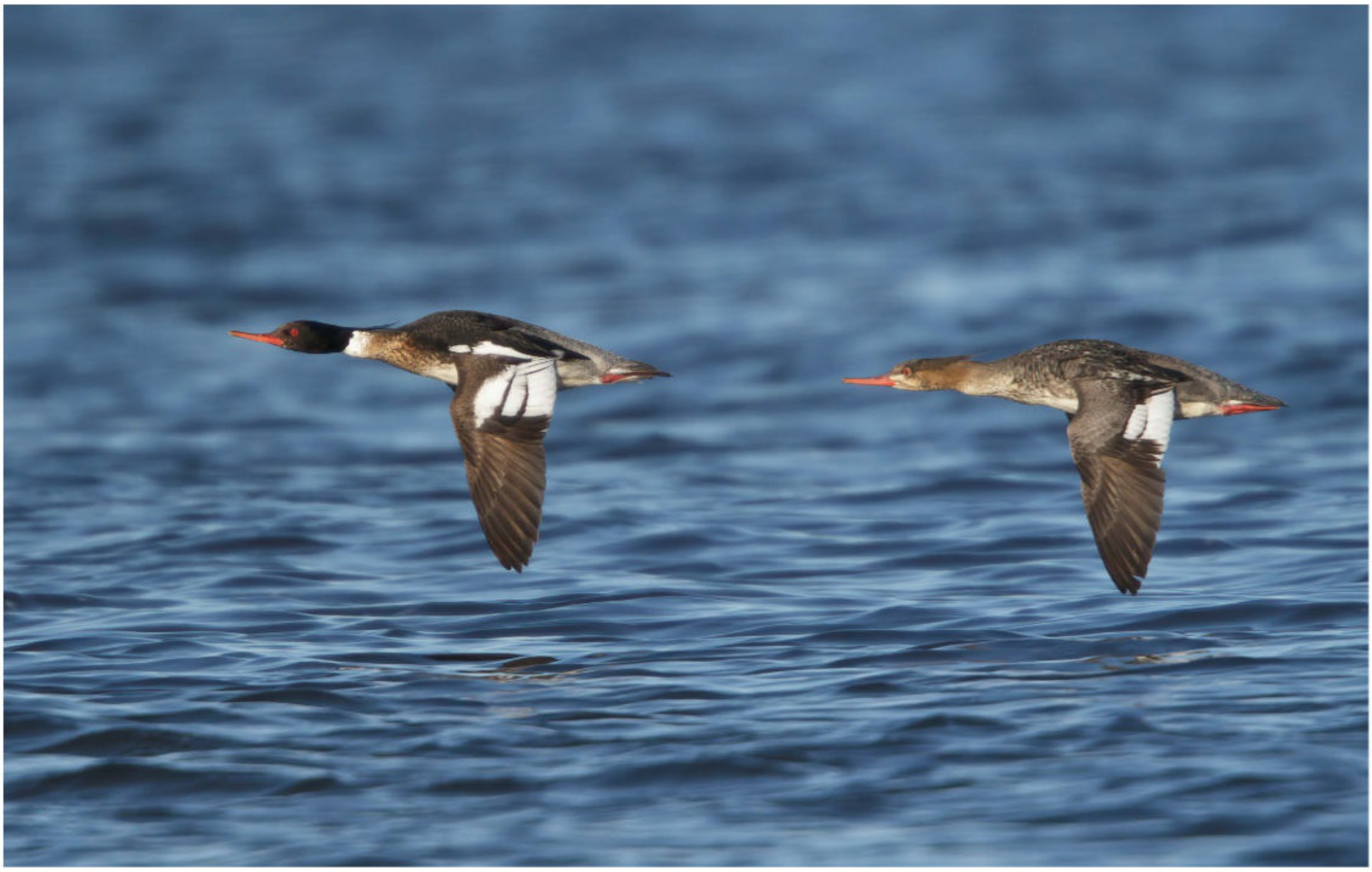
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

TWELVE: Smew (Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, 14 December 2014). The dark orange cap, white chin and throat and grey body of this Smew are all characters of birds in female-type plumages. The dark lores and 'fore-face' here indicate that this bird is likely to be either an adult female or a young male, while the suggestion of white feathering within the dark cap points strongly towards the latter.

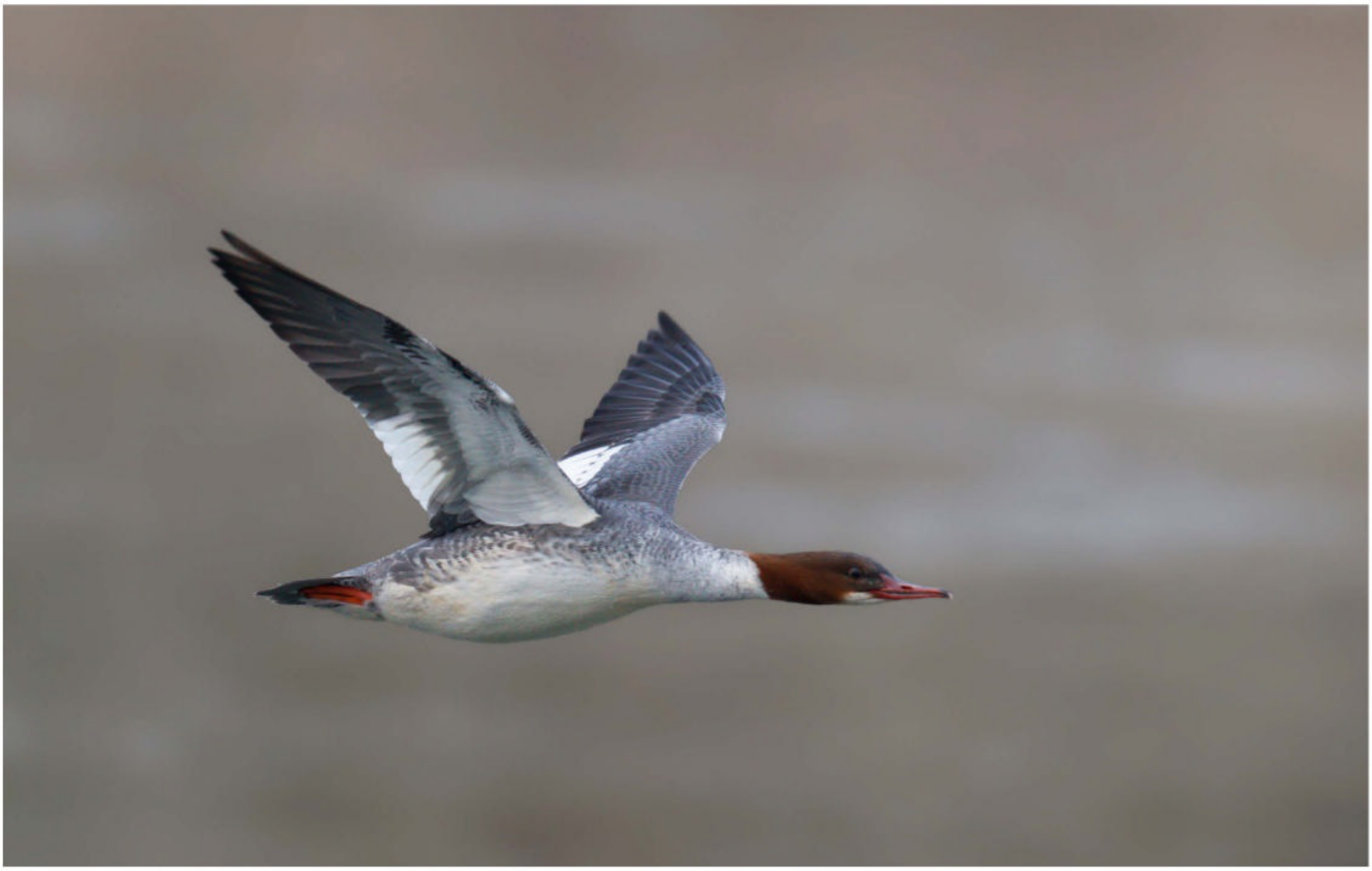


JIM ALMOND (WWW.SHROPSHIREBIRDER.CO.UK)

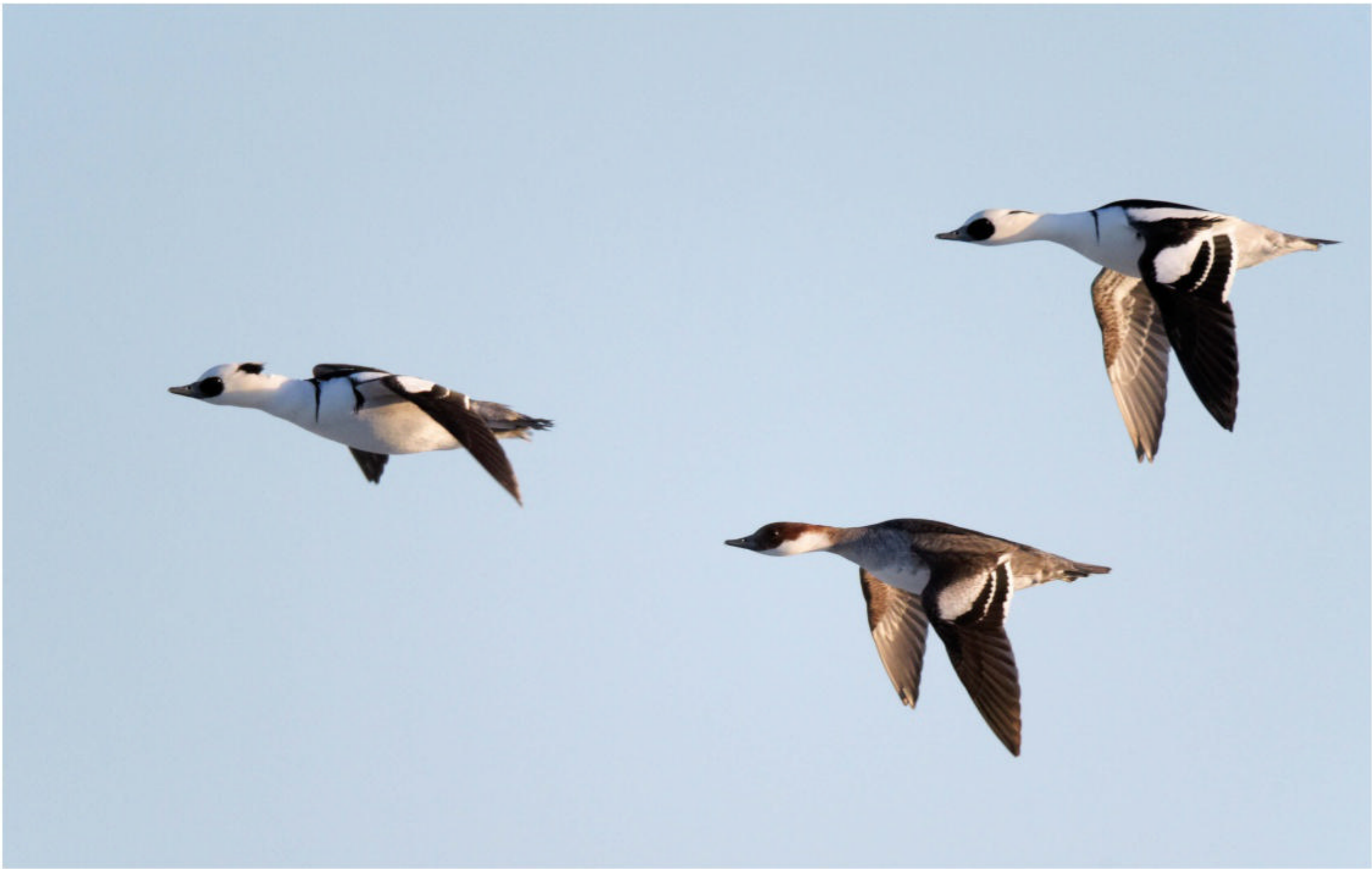
THIRTEEN: Hooded Merganser (Texas, USA, 18 December 2016). This Hooded Merganser closely resembles a female, but the bill is dark, there is a suggestion of male patterning at the breast sides and the eye is a bright golden yellow. This latter feature in particular is a sure sign that the bird is male. Ageing Hooded Mergansers is tricky, however, and best resolved by reference to the wing pattern.


GLENN BARTLEY (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

FOURTEEN: Red-breasted Merganser (Manitoba, Canada, 20 June 2011). Flying sawbills show dramatic colour and tonal contrasts, not least because of the striking white patches in the wing which, although largely concealed when at rest, are highly obvious in flight. As shown here, Red-breasted Mergansers of both sexes show white in the secondaries and greater coverts, with adult males (right-hand bird) displaying a more extensive patch which also covers the median coverts.

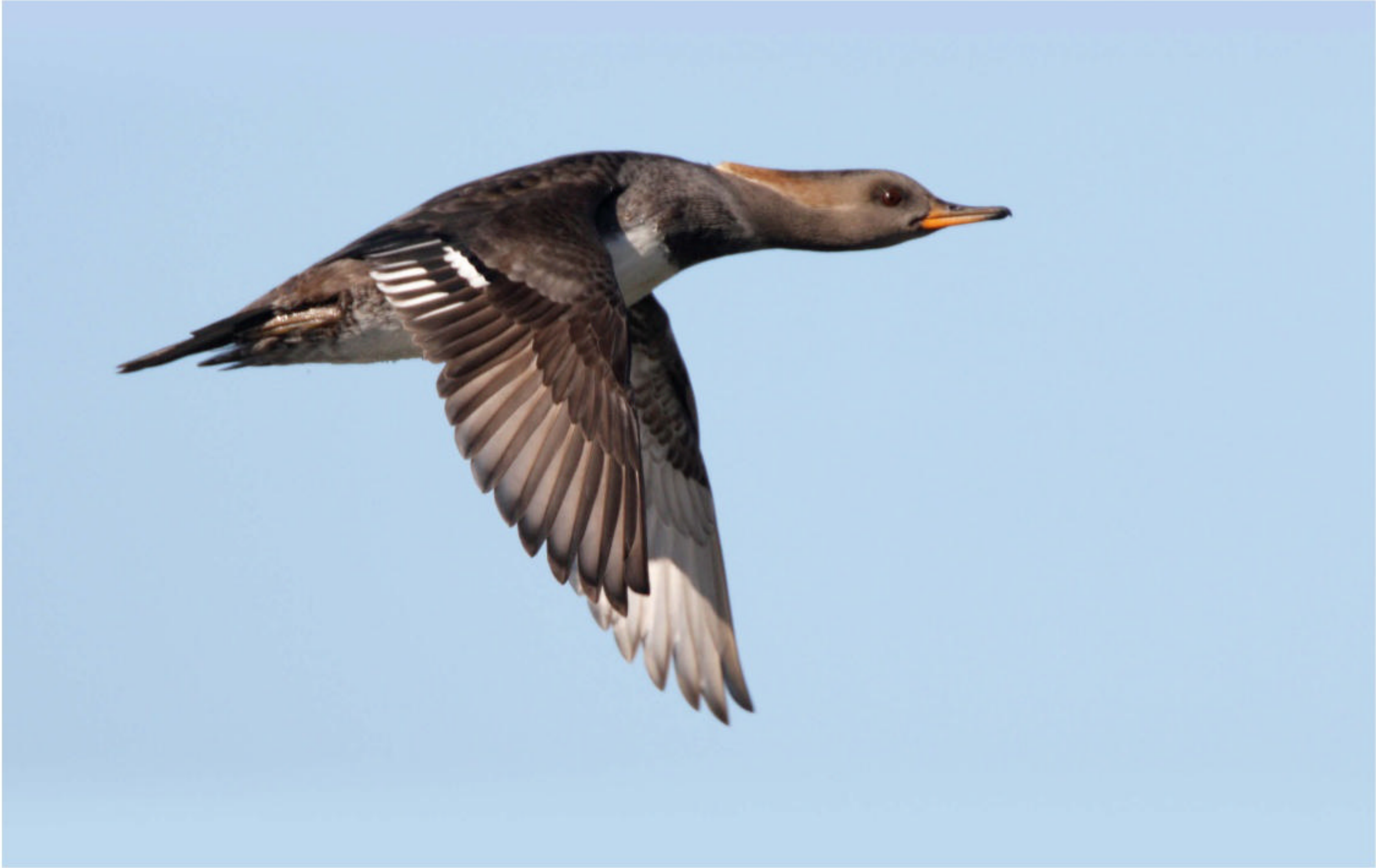

RAN SCHOLS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

FIFTEEN: Goosander (Grevenbicht Sittard-Geleen, The Netherlands, 12 February 2012). This flying adult female Goosander shows similar white wing patches on the wing to those of Red-breasted Merganser, but is easily identified by the head and neck markings. Note in particular how sharp the dividing line is between the rusty orange head and the white foreneck – a degree of contrast never approached by Red-breasted Merganser.



MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

SIXTEEN: Smew (Utö, Finland, 23 March 2011). The white wing markings on flying Smew are rather different, comprising white patches on the median coverts with white tips to the otherwise dark greater coverts and secondaries. The female-type bird (bottom) has brown hues in the wing coverts and rather broad white wing-bars, suggesting that it is a young bird. It is hardly necessary to note these patterns, however, as Smew is, irrespective of its plumage type, a very distinctive species.



MIKE DANZENBAKER (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

SEVENTEEN: Hooded Merganser (New Jersey, USA, 22 November 2008). This female Hooded Merganser (note the dark eye and yellow in the bill) shows, compared to the other species featured here, very little white on the wing – just some white in the secondaries and white tips to the greater coverts. The breadth of the greater covert tips on this bird age it as an adult; young birds having a much narrower and less clear-cut wing-bar.

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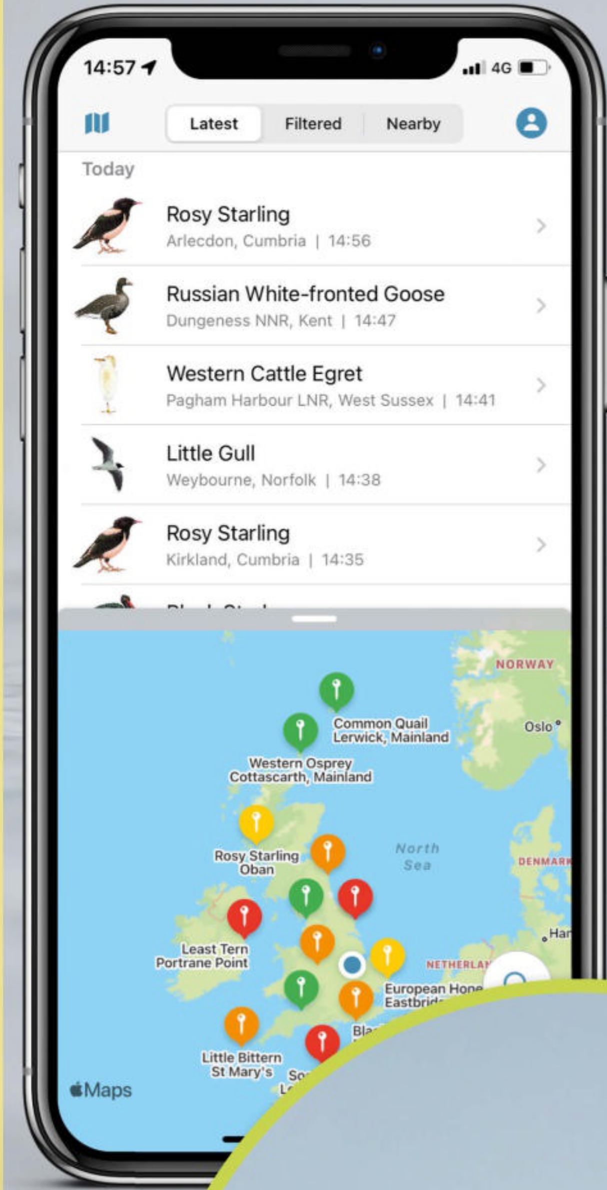
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Oslo
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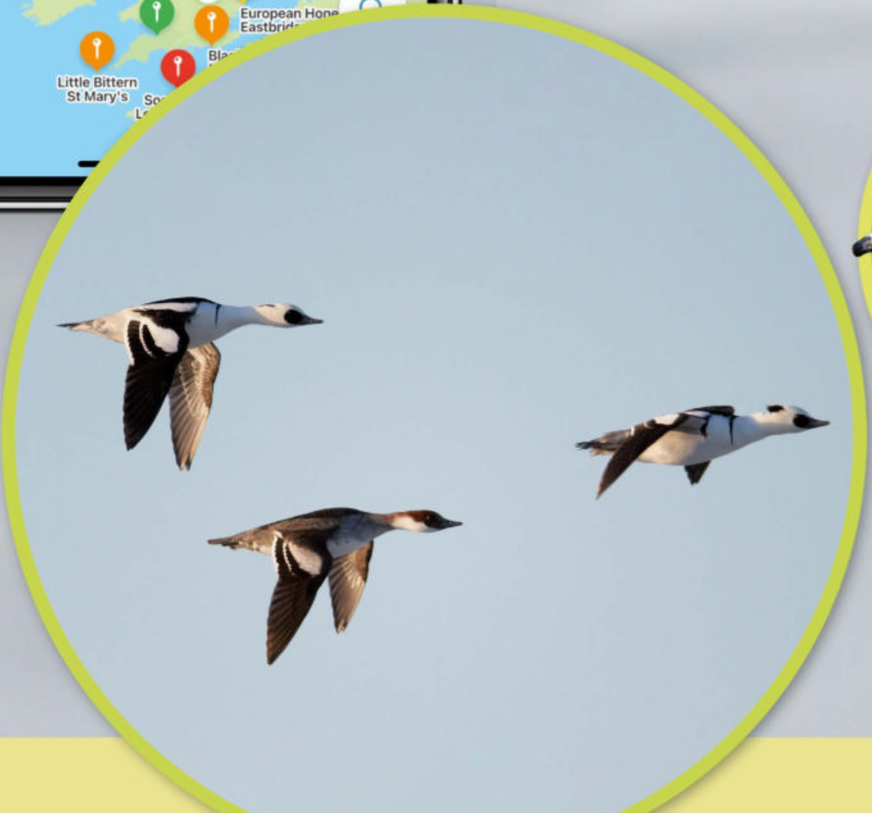

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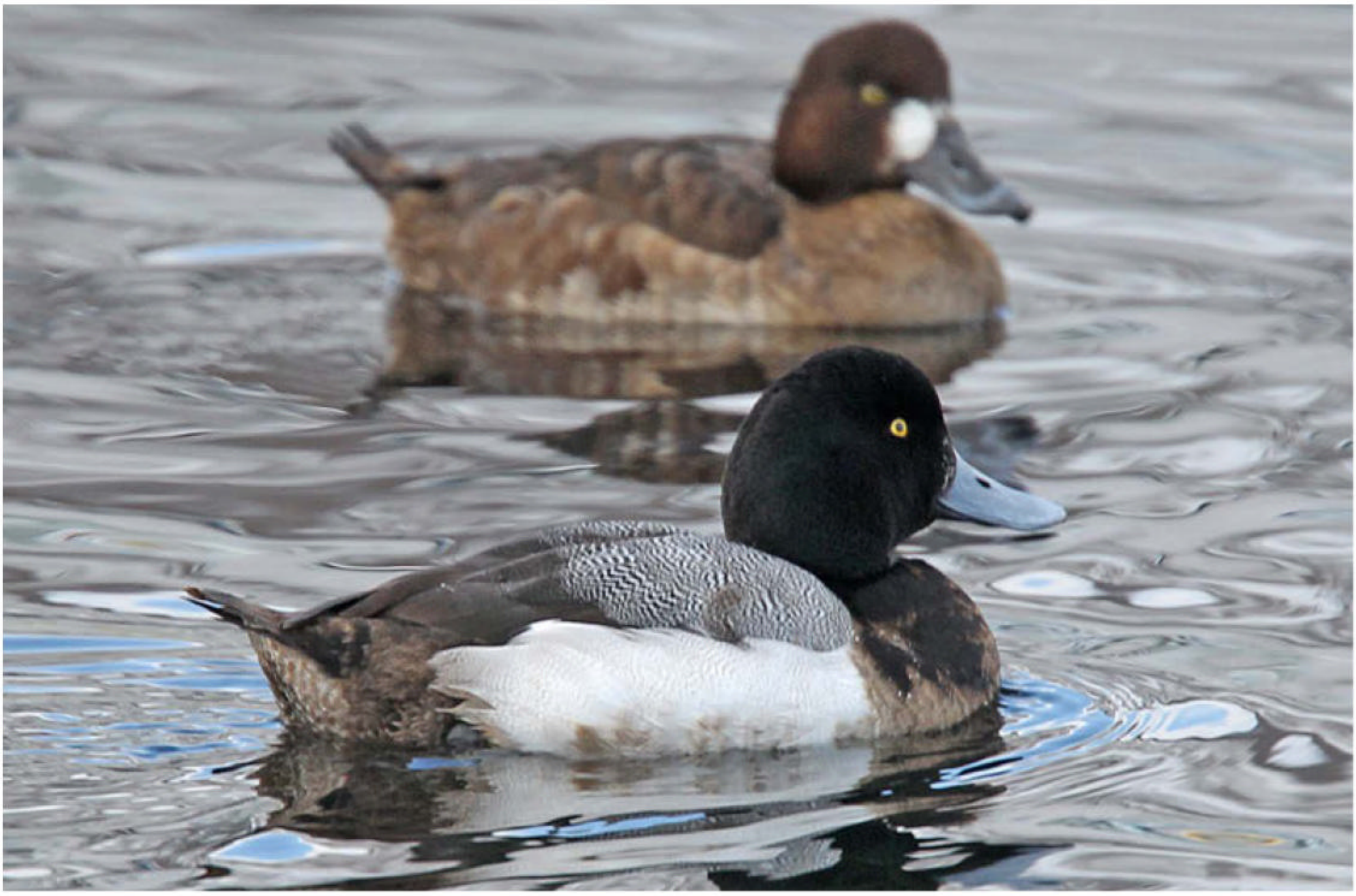
# Tufted Duck, Greater and Lesser Scaup

Words by Andy Stoddart


ANDREW MOON

ONE: Greater Scaup (adult female, behind, and first-winter male, Rausu, Japan, 5 February 2012). Both these birds show the large rounded, rather bulbous head and heavy body typical of Greater Scaup. The female shows slight grey tones in the mantle which reduce the contrast with the flanks and make the head look dark, while the white around the base of the bill is very extensive and meets over the culmen. The first-winter male is well advanced and already starting to resemble an adult in terms of its general plumage pattern.

In winter, it is often wildfowl to which we turn our attention. *Aythya* ducks are common and widespread, and even the lowliest wetland patch watcher has a chance of finding one of the scarce or rare species, as cold weather movements reshuffle the ducks at various sites. But look carefully through those Tufted Duck: hidden among them could be the scarce Greater Scaup, or the Nearctic vagrant Lesser Scaup – find them using our definitive guide to these difficult black-and-white diving ducks.

# Basic Principles

Every winter brings with it a new opportunity to scrutinise *Aythya* ducks. Most encounters will be with Tufted Ducks, but it is always worth searching carefully for its two close relatives, Greater and Lesser Scaups. Identification is not always straightforward, however. This group of ducks has a variety of plumages and, to make matters worse, is notorious for producing hybrids, some of which can appear very similar either to one of its parents or, sometimes, to another species altogether.

### Tufted Duck

Tufted Duck is by far the commonest *Aythya* and therefore the most familiar. Though a scarce breeding bird in Britain, it is much more regular in winter when numbers are boosted by continental migrants. At this time of year, any lake, reservoir or gravel pit should host this species, as well as its frequent companion, Pochard.

Tufted Duck generally shuns the coast, but is reliably found in any freshwater habitat with water deep enough to dive in. Numbers at some sites can be very large, making the task of sifting through them a long one.

Many Tufted Ducks in winter will be the easy-to-identify black-backed and white-flanked adult males. At closer range, the characteristic shaggy crest will be easily seen. Females and first-winters are, however, a dark chocolate-brown colour and look much more anonymous (though, as in all three species, young males will steadily acquire male plumage characters during the winter).

On such birds look for their small size and neat, compact proportions, a steep forehead, rather flattish crown and a vestigial nape tuft. Tbe solid dark brown upperparts contrast strongly with the flanks, and there is a small and diffuse white patch around the bill base, though this is often absent. The bill is rather broad and an extensive dark bill tip extends beyond the ‘nail’. In flight or when flapping, the wing-bar is white, but becomes greyer and more diffuse across the outer primaries.

### Greater Scaup

This species is essentially a winter visitor and in most cases confined to coastal waters. It is a bird with a northerly distribution, however, and is quite scarce around southern English coasts. Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, many of us see this species most frequently away from the coast, as a straggler to inland freshwater where it will readily consort with its commoner Tufted Duck and Pochard cousins. Here the task is to pick it out among a possibly large flock of other *Aythyas*.

An adult male Greater Scaup is readily identified by its smooth pale grey mantle – with only very fine vermiculations – contrasting with white flanks, black breast and black rear end. The head lacks a nape tuft. Females and first-winters, however, are essentially brown. On such birds look for their larger size and body bulk and length, somewhat sloping rear end, a rather large, rounded, almost bulbous head with a steep forehead and a large, very broad bill. Incipient grey in the upperparts will make the head contrast darker and there is little contrast between mantle and flanks. There is a large and distinctly defined (though variable) white patch around the bill base which usually meets over the culmen and a pale area on the ear coverts (on females in late winter). the dark at the bill tip restricted to the nail or the area immediately adjacent. The spread wing pattern is similar to that of Tufted Duck.

### Lesser Scaup

This is a true rarity, though now a regularly occurring one. Long clouded by confusion with hybrids, the first was identified as recently as 1987, in Staffordshire, but since this breaking of the credibility barrier, Lesser Scaup has been shown to be an annual vagrant in small numbers, with more than 150 records. It frequents freshwater habitats and can occur anywhere which attracts *Aythya* ducks, with the result that most counties in Britain have now hosted at least one.

In some ways this species is intermediate between Tufted Duck and Greater Scaup, being, put very crudely, the size of the former with the plumage of the latter. Adult males show a grey back like Greater Scaup, though it will be more clearly and more coarsely vermiculated dark grey, especially at the rear, and should appear slightly more restricted in extent.

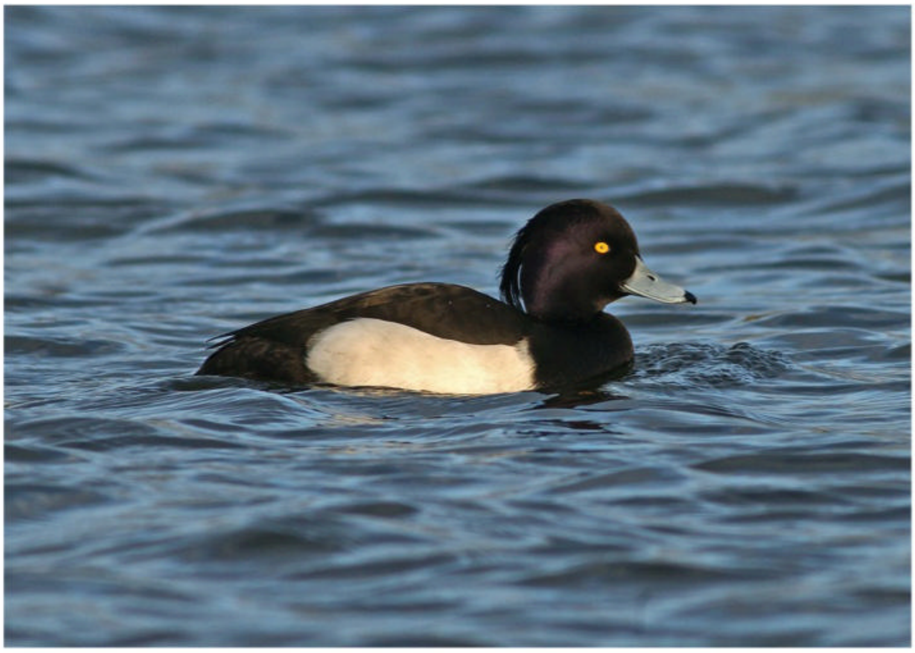
On females and first-winters look out for their small size and compact proportions – even more than Tufted Duck – but with a strongly sloping forehead and peaked rear crown, although beware the similar effect which can be created by a Tufted Duck’s tuft. Like Greater Scaup, incipient grey in the upperparts makes the head contrast darker, and there is little contrast between mantle and flanks. There is a large and distinctly defined, though variable, white patch around the bill base and the dark at the bill base restricted to the nail only. In flight or when flapping, the wing-bar is white on the secondaries but distinctly grey across the primaries. On most, the divide between these two feather tracts is sharp.

### Hybrids

In most identification conundrums, the hybrid option is pretty unlikely – a last resort when all else fails. However, hybrid *Aythyas* are regular, not only involving the three species considered here but also Ferruginous Duck and Ring-necked Duck (at least). Sadly, therefore, any putative Lesser Scaup runs a very high risk of being a hybrid.

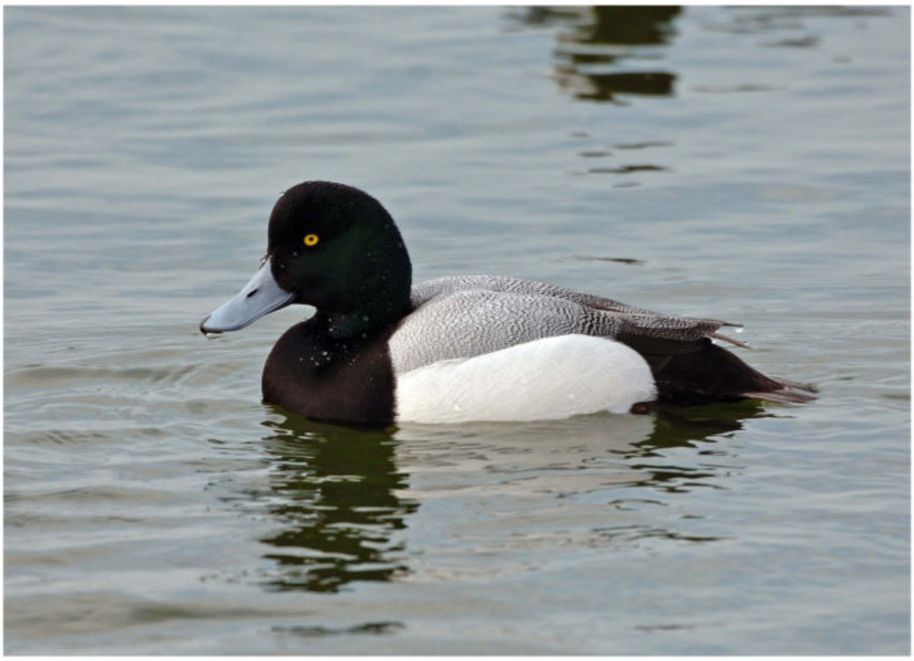
A high proportion of hybrids comes from wildfowl collections, where the mixture of species and their close proximity provides excellent opportunities for mating. Unsurprisingly, therefore, hybrids come in many different guises. Fortunately a number of recognisable hybrid types have been identified, though it is mostly males.

TWO: Tufted Duck (male, Sand Lake, Lancashire, 10 January 2009). This male Tufted Duck is straightforward to identify: it has solid black (not grey) upperparts and clean, sharply defined white flanks, while its purple-sheened head has a long and obvious dangling crest. Note that the dark on the bill tip is very extensive, extending well beyond the nail, unlike in the two scaup species. The bird also looks typically small and compactly proportioned. Birds this close with this classic set of features should present no identification problems at all.



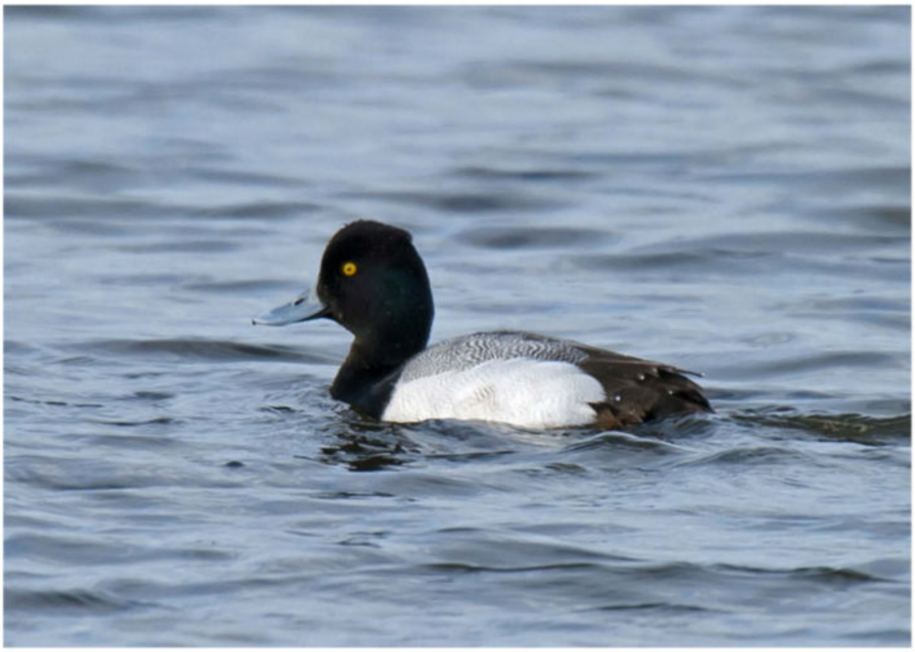
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

THREE: Greater Scaup (male, Seaforth, Lancashire, 23 March 2006). This is a classic portrait of a drake Greater Scaup. In comparison with the Tufted Duck above the head looks large and rounded with a steep forehead and no crest. The body also looks large and the whole bird seems to sit higher out of the water. The bill also looks large and broad. As for plumage, the head is nicely glossed green, the mantle is a soft pale grey with only very faint vermiculations and the dark at the bill tip is confined to the nail and therefore barely visible in a side-on view.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

FOUR: Lesser Scaup (male, Marshside RSPB, Lancashire, 22 March 2011). This drake Lesser Scaup shows the classic combination of small, compact, short-bodied, rather Tufted Ducklike proportions and rather Greater Scaup-like plumage. However, although superficially resembling Tufted Duck in shape, the head is less rounded with a steeper forehead and a rear crown 'bump', though no tuft. The basic plumage pattern is that of Greater Scaup with green-glossed head and grey mantle, but the latter appears darker due to the coarser vermiculations and the flanks also have subtle grey wavy lines. Like Greater Scaup, the dark at the bill tip is restricted to the nail and almost invisible here.



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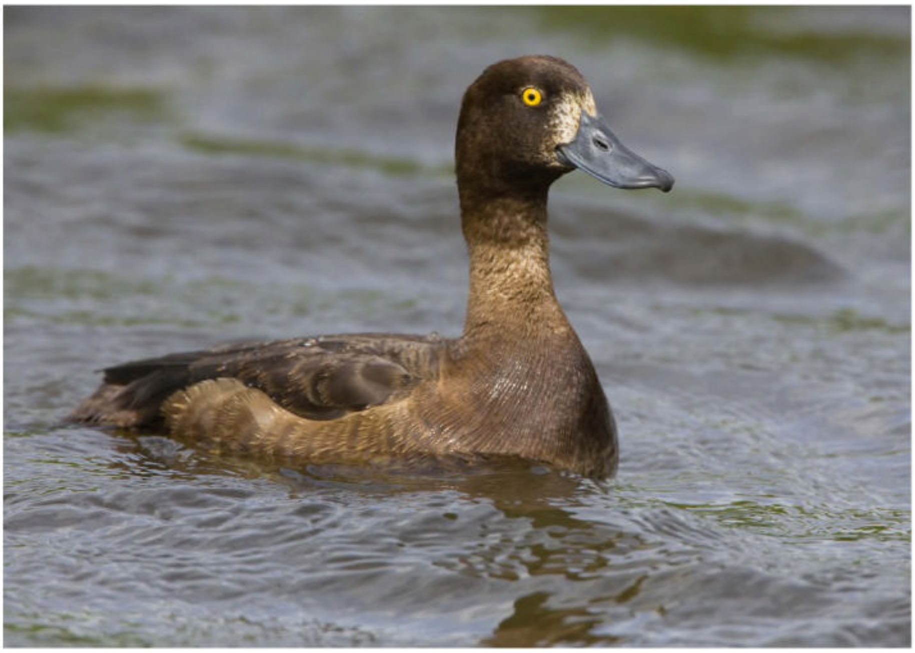
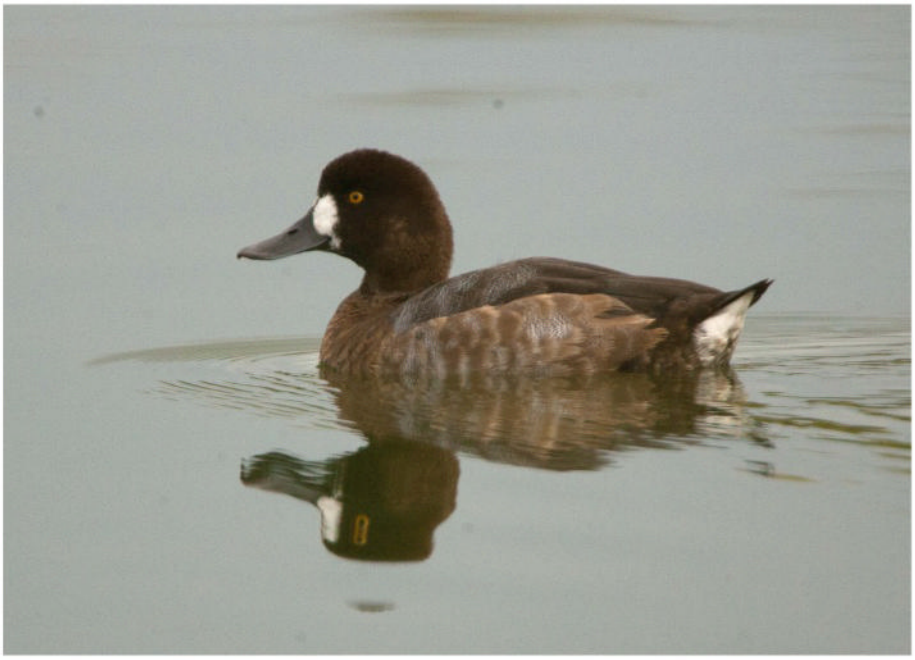


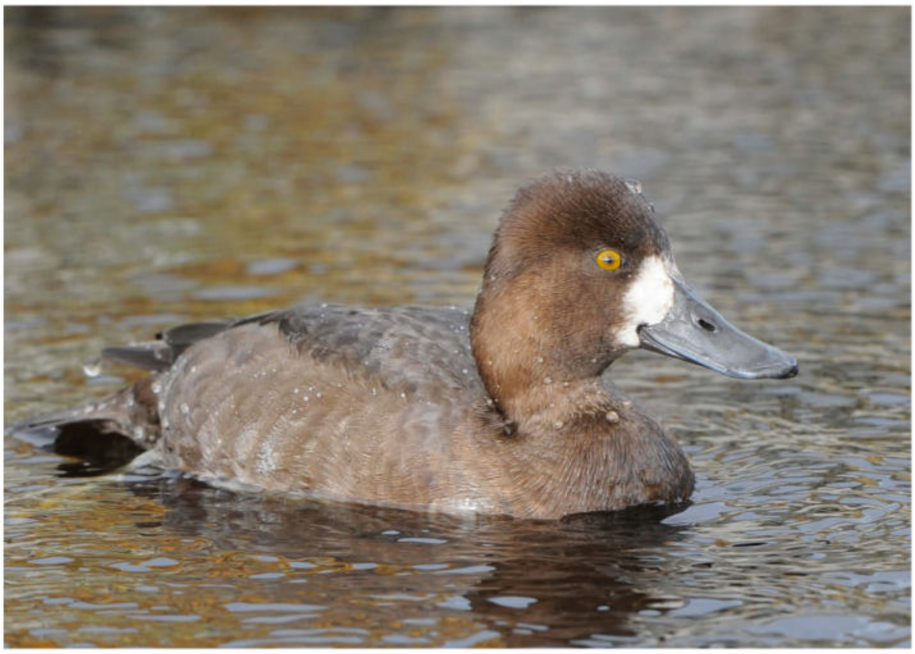
ARIE OUWERKERK (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

FIVE: Tufted Duck (female, Terschelling, The Netherlands, 27 June 2007). With its neat proportions, small rounded head and small body, this looks immediately like a Tufted Duck even though there is no hint in this posture of a tuft at the rear crown. A glance at the plumage confirms the identification: the mantle is brown with no incipient grey and is also quite dark, contrasting with the flanks, and the pale surround to the bill is both off-white and quite poorly defined. Finally, the dark bill tip is diffuse and extensive.



TONY MILLS (WWW.NOTJUSTBIRDS.COM)

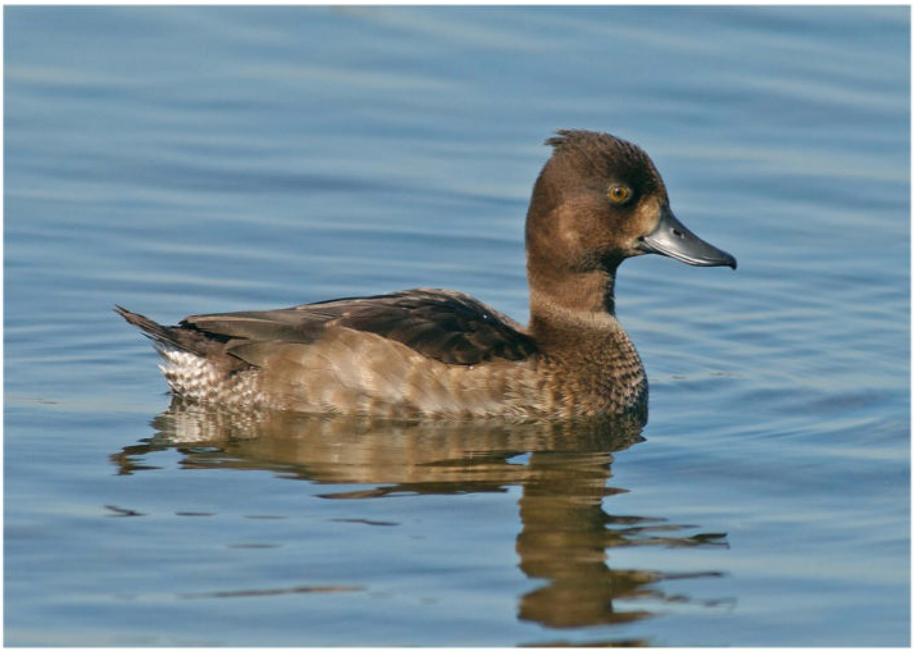
SIX: Greater Scaup (female, Snettisham, Norfolk, 20 September 2005). With its pure white and sharply defined facial patch, this bird already looks like a good Greater Scaup candidate, an impression confirmed by its mantle which, containing both brown and grey feathers, is quite pale and offers little contrast with the flanks, though it does enhance the darkness of the head. In terms of structure, the head is large and rounded with a steep forehead and the body also looks large, riding high out of the water. The restricted dark at the bill tip can also be seen in this image.



REBECCA NASON (WWW.REBECCANASON.COM)

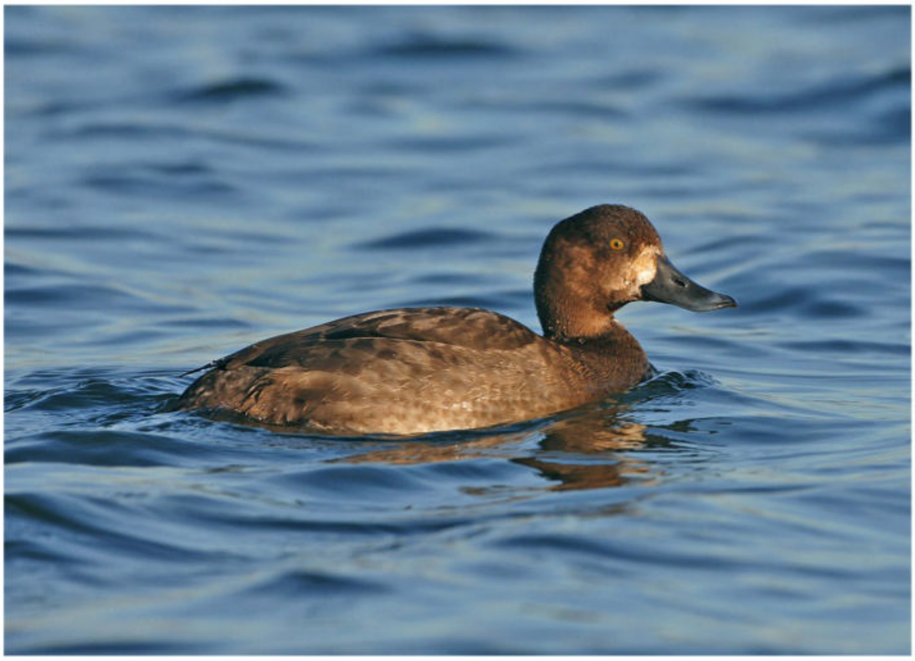
SEVEN: Lesser Scaup (female, Fair Isle, Shetland, 7 October 2011). This bird superficially resembles a Tufted Duck in its small, neat proportions. However, the mantle is quite pale and offers limited contrast with the flanks. Furthermore, the facial patch is very white, extensive and sharply defined and meets well above the culmen and the dark at the bill tip seems to be restricted to the nail. Adding further weight to the case for Lesser Scaup is the steep forehead and rather high rear crown. A good flap and a view of the wing pattern would clinch this bird.

EIGHT: Tufted Duck (juvenile, Seaforth, Lancashire, 9 September 2004). This young Tufted Duck looks typically small, squat and short bodied, and the rather flattish crown with a pronounced tuft is shown by no other *Aythya*. To confirm the identification we should look at the plumage and bare parts too. Here lie ample clues to the bird's identity. The mantle is very dark brown and contrasts sharply with the flanks, the facial patch is almost non-existent and the bill has an extensive but diffuse dark tip. In all respects this is a normal juvenile Tufted Duck.



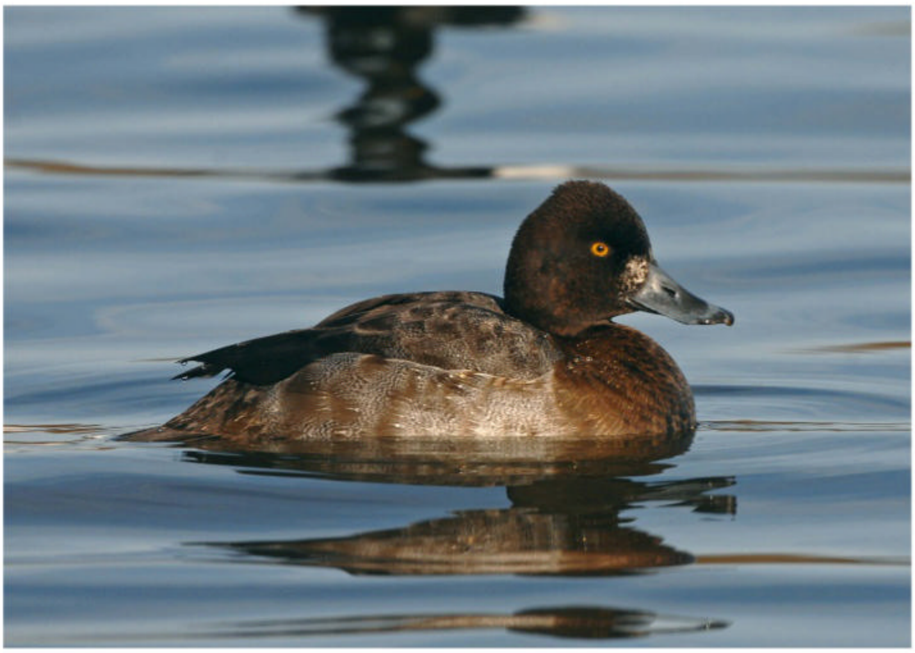
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

NINE: Greater Scaup (first-winter, Seaforth, Lancashire, 19 November 2005). With its large bulky body, long sloping rear end, large, very rounded, bulbous head and large bill, this looks immediately like a Greater Scaup. To confirm our quick identification, there is minimal mantle/flank contrast and the whole body looks quite uniform in both hue and tone. The facial patch is still developing, but it is already large and reasonably well-defined and extends over the culmen. The bill pattern, though difficult to establish on this side-on photo, appears to show a dark nail only.

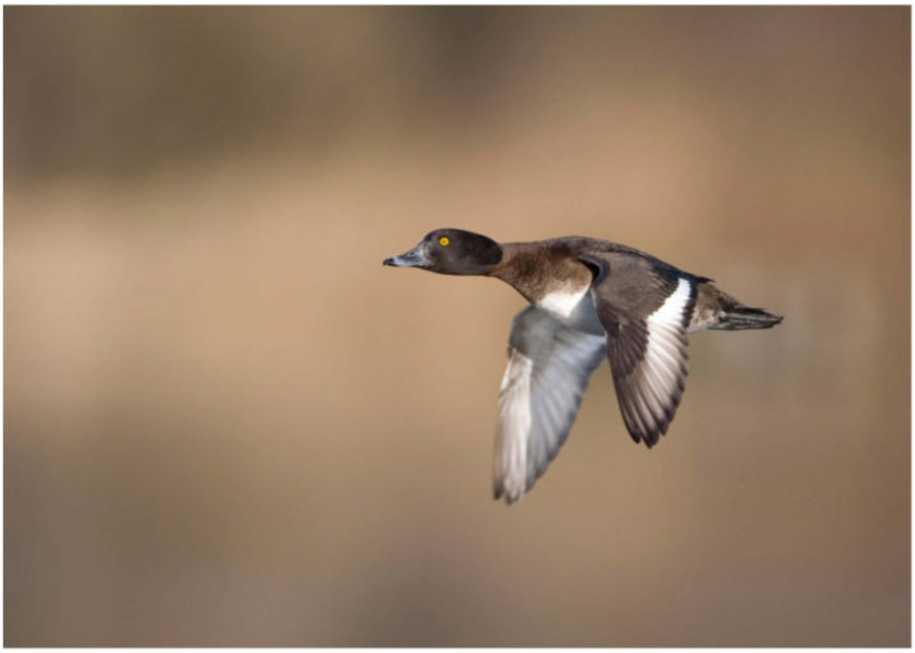


STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

TEN: Lesser Scaup (first-winter female, Caerlaverock WWT, Dumfries and Galloway, 18 February 2007). Again, this young Lesser Scaup shows features suggestive of both Tufted Duck and Greater Scaup. Its small body and neat proportions suggest the former while its grey mantle clearly indicates the latter. On closer examination, however, it contains all the necessary features of a Lesser Scaup: a steep forehead and 'bumpy' rear crown, much grey in the mantle reducing the contrast with the flanks and heightening the contrast with the dark head, green gloss coming through on the head, a developing white facial patch and a dark nail.

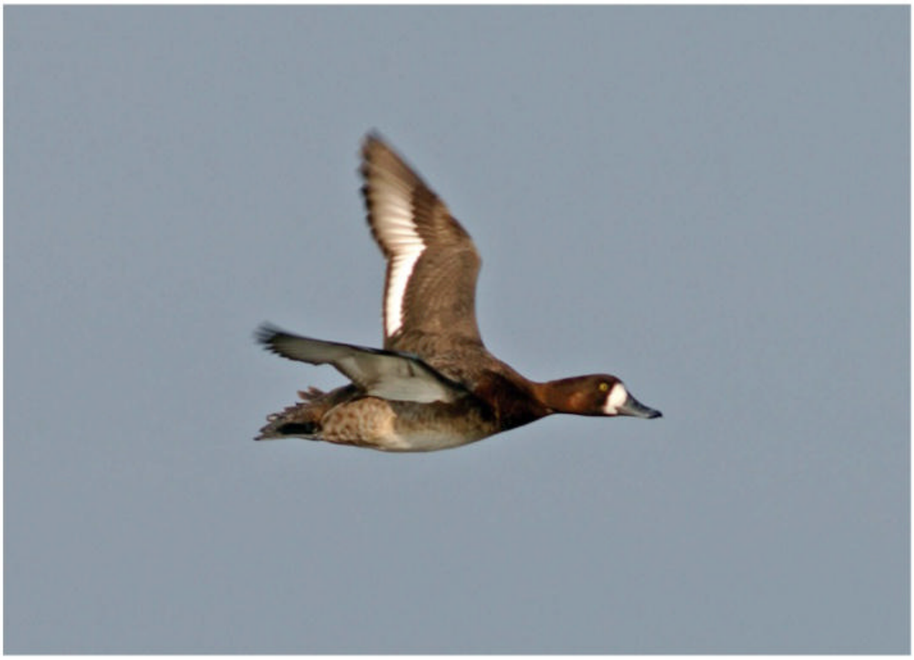


STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)



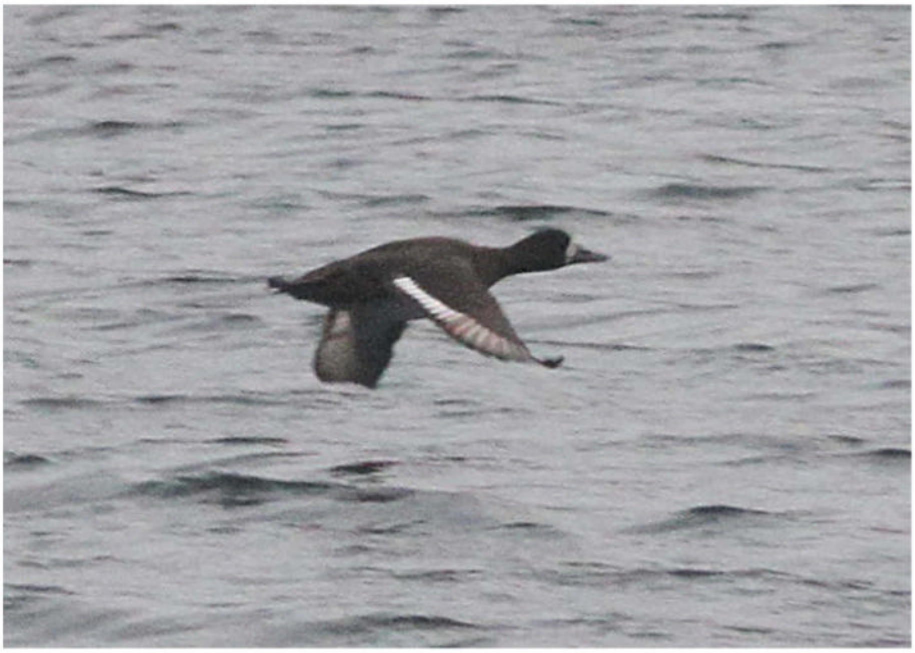
ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

ELVEN: Tufted Duck (female, Whitlingham CP, Norfolk, 10 January 2009). The most eyecatching feature of any flying *Aythya* is the broad white wing-bar. That on this bird is typical of both Tufted Duck and Greater Scaup: white on the secondaries but progressively greyer or browner across the primaries. The head and bill confirm that this is a Tufted Duck, however – it lacks a white facial patch and the dark on the bill tip is extensive.



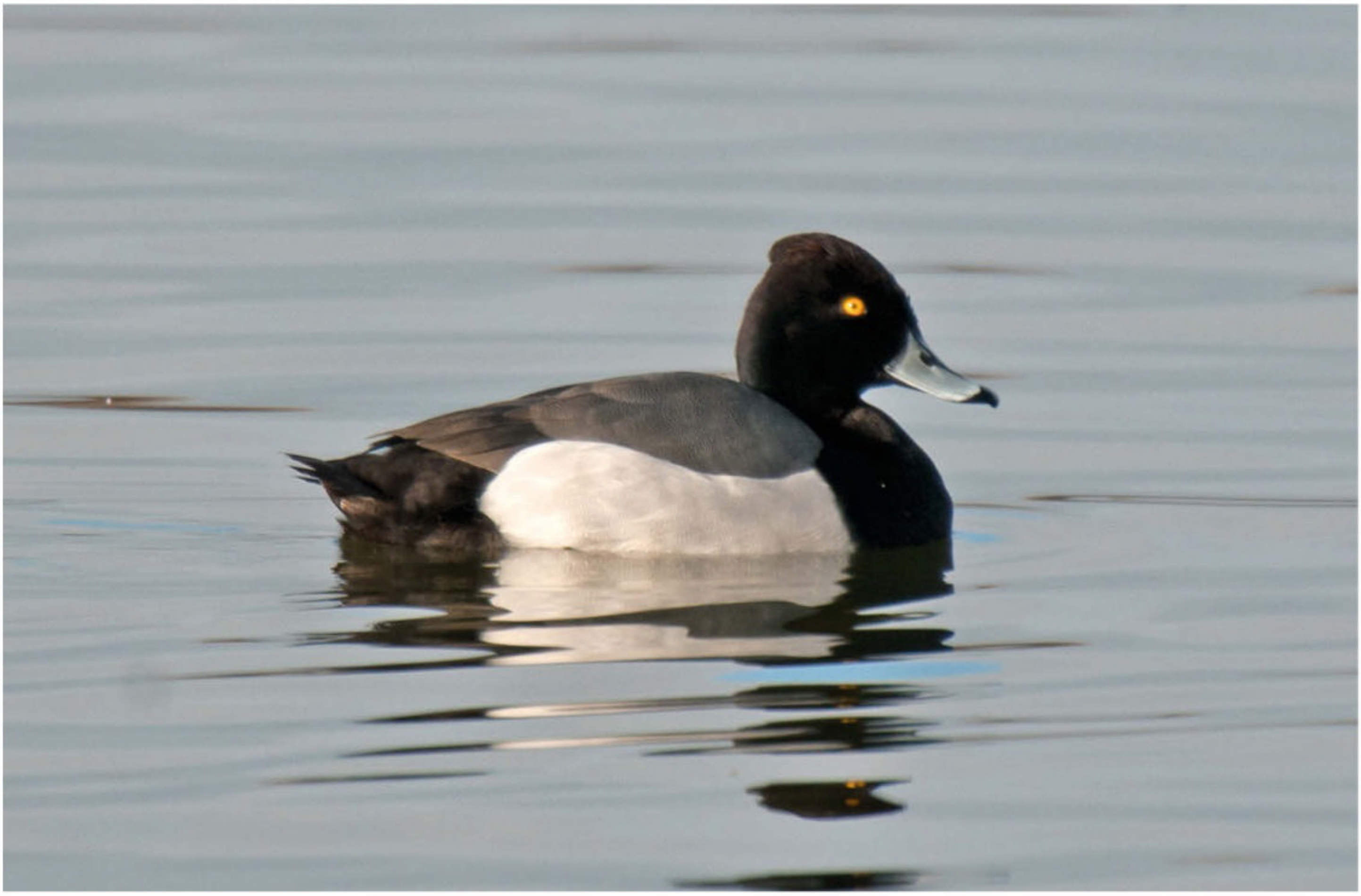
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

TWELVE: Greater Scaup (female, Seaforth, Lancashire, 8 February 2005). The wing-bar on this flying Greater Scaup resembles that of Tufted Duck, but the white facial patch is strong and prominent, seemingly encircling the bill base, and the dark at the bill tip can be seen to be restricted to the nail. The bird also looks large bodied and round headed, also typical of Greater Scaup.



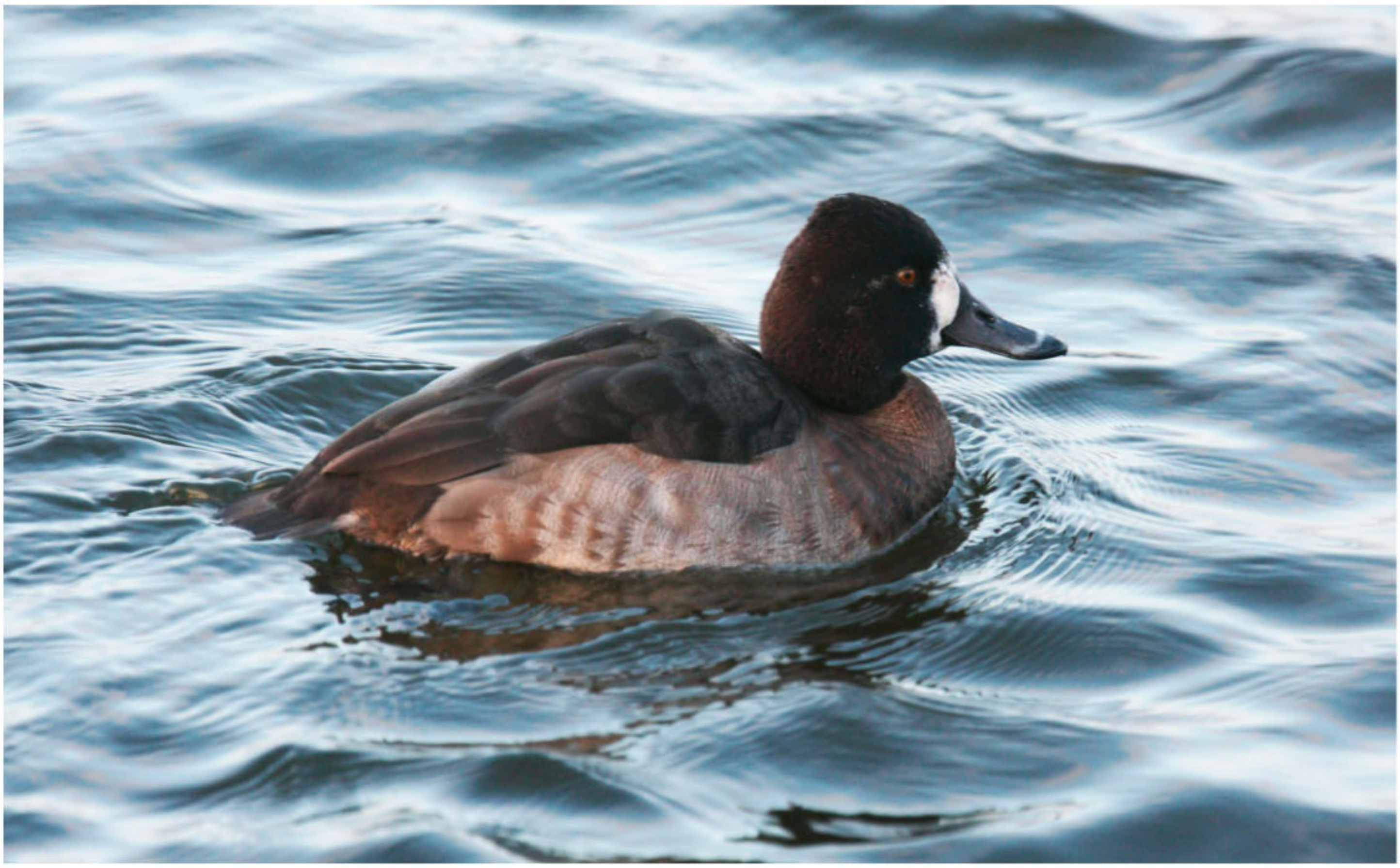
JULIAN BELL

THIRTEEN: Lesser Scaup (female, Hordaland, Norway, 19 December 2011). This flying Lesser Scaup shows the typical peaked head and large white facial patch of this species, but the key feature in flight is the wing-bar – white across the secondaries with a sharp, abrupt transition to grey across the primaries, unlike the more gradual transition in the wingbars of the other two species.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

FOURTEEN: *Aythy*a hybrid (male, Seaforth, Cheshire, 28 January 2009). This bird shows a small, rather Lesser Scaup-like head combined with a rather Tufted Duck-like rear crown tuft and a large bulky Greater Scaup-like body. The mantle is grey but appears very smooth, lacking even the soft vermiculations of Greater Scaup, while the bill shows extensive dark at the bill tip. This combination of features is not shown by any *Aythya* species and the bird must therefore be a hybrid.

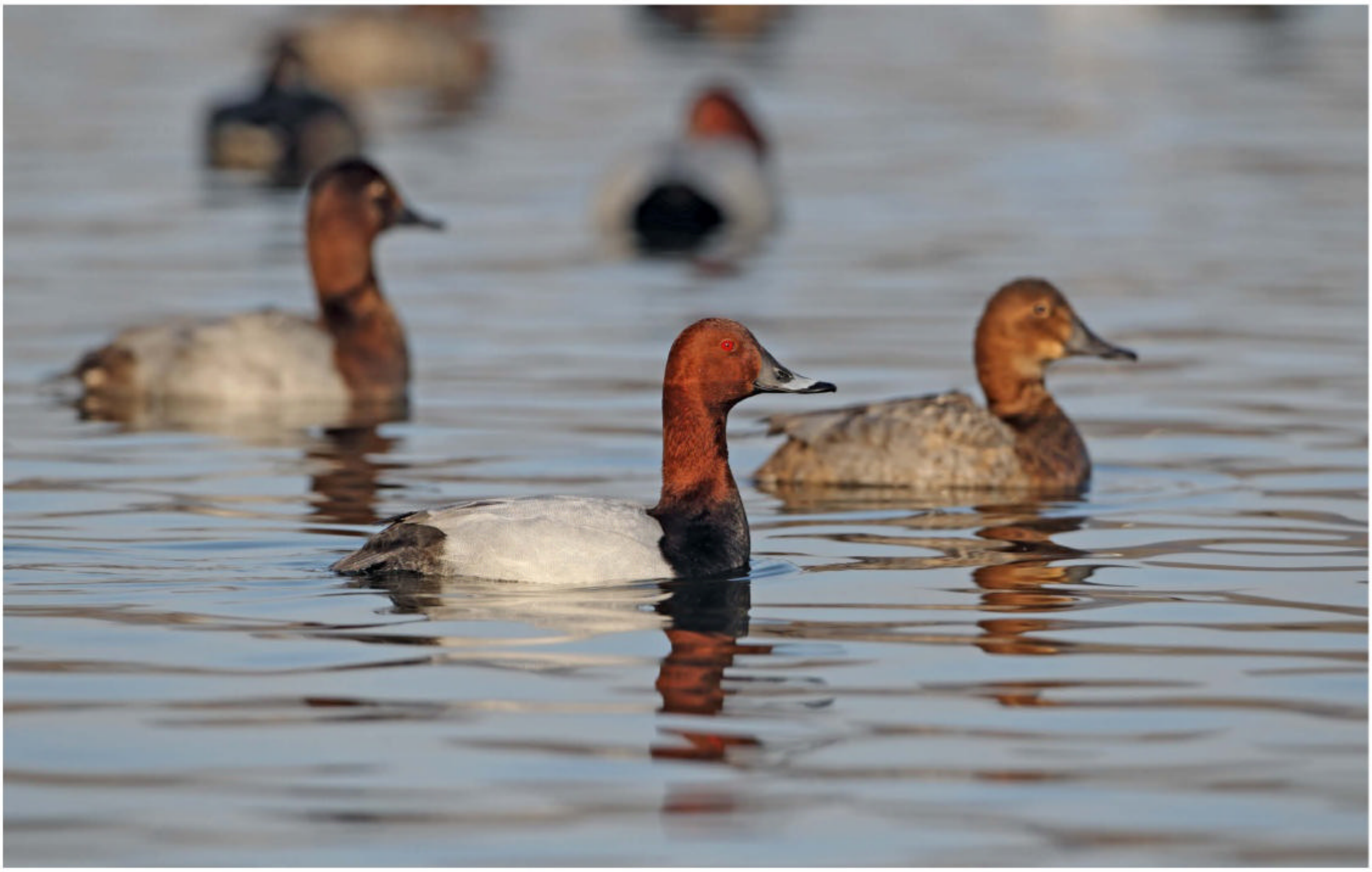


ALAN TATE

FIFTEEN: *Aythya* hybrid (Welney, Norfolk, 2 January 2008). This bird has quite a large body, a rounded head and a strong white facial patch, all suggestive of Greater Scaup. However, the head also shows a slight rear crown 'bump', there is a strong contrast between the mantle and the flanks and the bill has extensive dark at the tip. Again, this bird shows characters of no known species and must also be a hybrid; identifying the parentage of such birds is not always straightforward.

# Common Pochard, Redhead and Canvasback

Words by Keith Vinicombe



ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

ONE: Adult male Common Pochard (Whitlingham CP, Norwich, Norfolk, 11 February 2012). Although appearing rather drab and non-descript at a distance, this fine portrait of an alert male Common Pochard in full breeding plumage shows what a handsome bird it is. The chestnut head and grey body allow for easy recognition, but the bird's shape – with a long, sloping forehead, a wedge-shaped bill and a rather thick neck – is also distinctive, as too is its deep red eye and pale grey patch towards the tip of the bill. Despite being a fairly common and familiar species in autumn and winter, as a breeding bird it is scarce and localised.

Common Pochard is a species familiar to all birders, often passing up proper scrutiny owing to its frequency on our ponds, lakes and reservoirs. However, not only is it now declining in numbers, but it is also possible to confuse it with two similar very rare North American ducks, both with a proven vagrancy potential to reach British shores. Keith Vinicombe looks at the subtle and tricky identification criteria of Canvasback and Redhead, to help separate them from the far commoner species and its confusing hybrids.

# Basic Principles

As its name suggests, Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* is a familiar duck in Britain. Migrants start to arrive in late summer and, during the period 2004-09, around 38,000 were present in winter. It is, however, declining as a non-breeding migrant, with counts in 2013-14 dropping to 16,300, the lowest-ever total. The British wintering population has halved in under 20 years (Holt *et al* 2015). However, 'short-stopping' on the Continent in recent milder winters – a consequence of climate change – may also be a factor, as may ecological problems such as eutrophication.

As a breeding species in Britain it is localised, with just 360 confirmed pairs in 2013 (Holling *et al* 2015). In spring, Common Pochards have a very interesting courtship behaviour. Unlike most ducks, they do not appear to form discrete pairs; instead, they have a kind of lekking system in which many males gang up and pursue just one or two females.

On larger waters, the first returning post-breeding males may appear as early as late May. Many of these also join in with these 'lekking' pursuits, resulting in the bizarre spectacle of large gangs of displaying males pursuing and pestering just two or three females. This behaviour may explain to some extent the significant sexual imbalance outside the breeding season, with males outnumbering females. However, males also tend to winter closer to their breeding areas, with the less dominant females being forced to move further south.

In North America, Common Pochard is replaced by two similar species: Canvasback *A valisineria* and Redhead *A americana*. Both have occurred in Britain although, somewhat surprisingly, they are extremely rare. There have been just seven records of Canvasback, all between 1996 and 2002. Three of them involved one-day birds and three were long-stayers, including a bird that returned to Norfolk and Essex in three winters.

Redhead is rarer still, with just one record. A male turned up at Bleasby, Nottinghamshire, from 8-27 March 1996 and then at Rutland Water, Leicestershire, from 4-24 February 1997.

Given that vagrant Ring-necked Duck *A collaris* and Lesser Scaup *A affinis* both increased dramatically once the first birds had been recorded, it is something of a surprise that Redhead and Canvasback have not followed suit. Despite the fact that birders have been on the lookout for them, no more have been found, indicating that both species are genuinely very rare on this side of the Atlantic. It is interesting to note that neither has occurred on the Azores, where both Ring-necked Duck and Lesser Scaup turn up quite regularly, often in multiple arrivals.

## Identification

Canvasback and Redhead are similar to Common Pochard, with the sexes having a similar sequence of plumages, but the two American species are structurally very different. Canvasback is similar to Common Pochard but is noticeably larger, longer necked and longer billed, these last two features combining with a long sloping forehead to produce a strikingly elongated head profile. The bill appears narrower and less spatulate.

Although similar to Common Pochard and Canvasback in plumage, Redhead is obviously different in shape, having a rounded head with a steep forehead, a rather spatulate bill and a stocky body. This combination is somewhat reminiscent of Greater Scaup *A marila*.

The biggest problem in the identification of Redhead and Canvasback is not their separation from Common Pochard, but distinguishing them from hybrids that superficially resemble them. In Britain, this problem has occurred on a number of occasions and it relates to three specific hybrids.

The first are hybrids between Common Pochard and Ferruginous Duck *A nyroca*, examples of which are surprisingly frequent. Many such birds resemble pure Ferruginous Ducks, but at the other end of the spectrum, some resemble Common Pochards and a few have shown a superficial resemblance to Redhead.

However, such birds usually show clear indications of their Ferruginous ancestry, such as a domed head with a central peak and a strong maroon tint to the breast. The upperparts, too, tend to be very dark, another character inherited from the blacker-backed Ferruginous Duck.

The bill may appear intermediate, but one such hybrid showed a black bill tip strongly curved on its inner edge, unlike the squared-off, 'dipped-in-ink' bill tip of Redhead. Common Pochard x Ferruginous hybrids are also likely to show distinct whitening in the wing-stripe, another Ferruginous feature that Redhead would never show. They also tend to be smaller and more compact than Common Pochard.

A more troublesome hybrid is Common Pochard x Canvasback. One returning bird at Chew Valley Lake, Somerset, from 1993 to 2003 was very similar to Canvasback except that it was slightly darker, lacked a black forehead and showed a small but distinct narrow white subterminal band across the bill tip.

It turned out to be a known Common Pochard x Canvasback hybrid, one of its parents being a pinioned Canvasback that had been released onto Roath Park Lake in Cardiff (Vinicombe 2003). When researching that particular bird, it was discovered that some of the Canvasbacks in the collection at Slimbridge also had small white subterminal bill bands, but birds studied there recently failed to show this feature.

A third problematic hybrid was a 'Redhead' that was discovered on Kenfig Pool, Mid Glamorgan, in November 2001. That individual wintered in the area until 2004; it was originally accepted by the Rarities Committee but then rejected following a review. This subtle bird was, essentially, a Redhead – even its display calls were spot on for that species – but what really let it down was its consistently domed head shape. What may well have been the same bird was also seen across the Severn Estuary at Chew Valley Lake in November 2006. Although a 90 per cent Redhead, unfortunately it seems that it had some Common Pochard genes in its ancestry.

## REFERENCES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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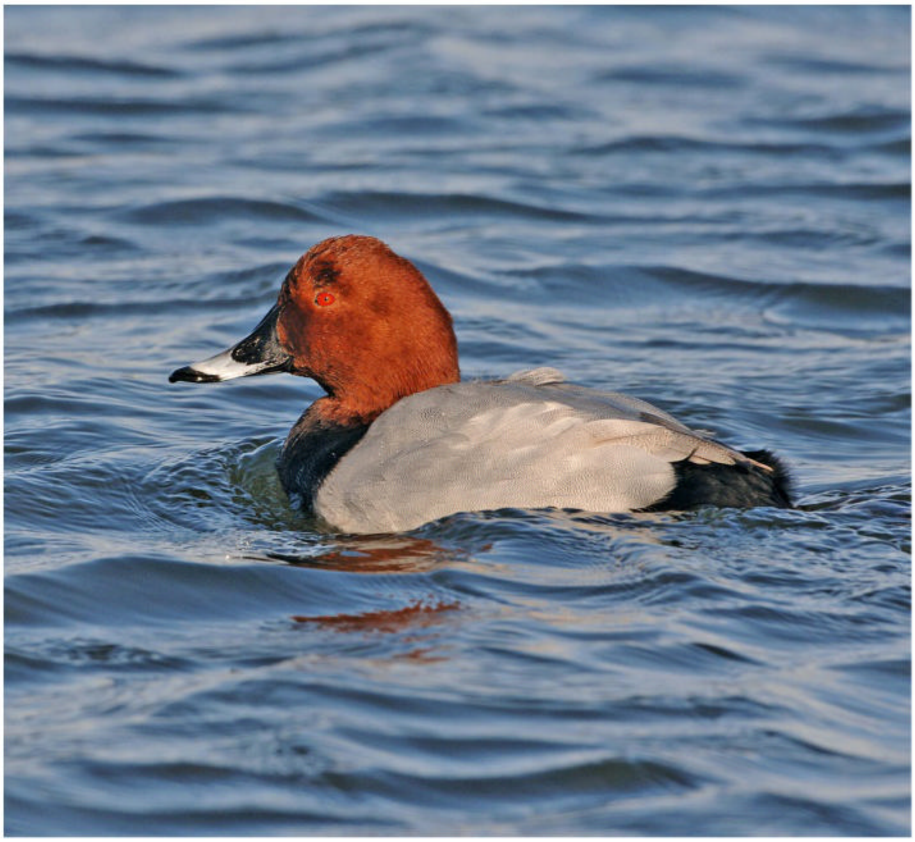
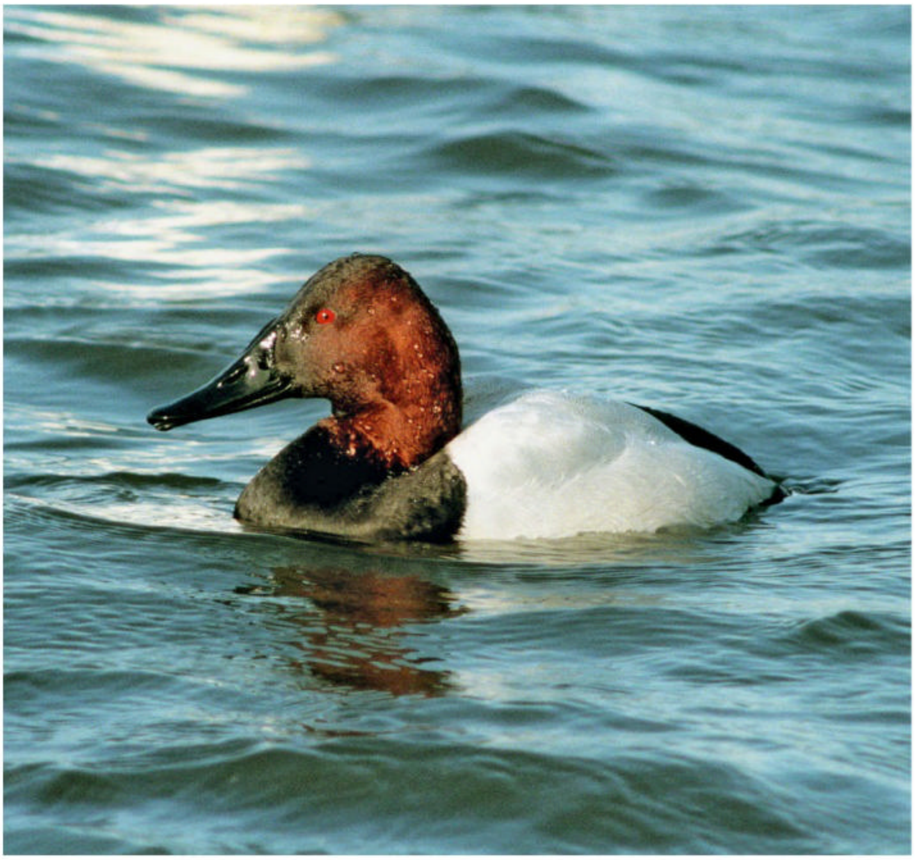
- Vinicombe, K. 2003. The identification of a hybrid Canvasback x Common Pochard: implications for the identification of vagrant Canvasbacks. *British Birds* 96: 112-118.

**Thanks to Rupert Higgins for his help with additional information.**

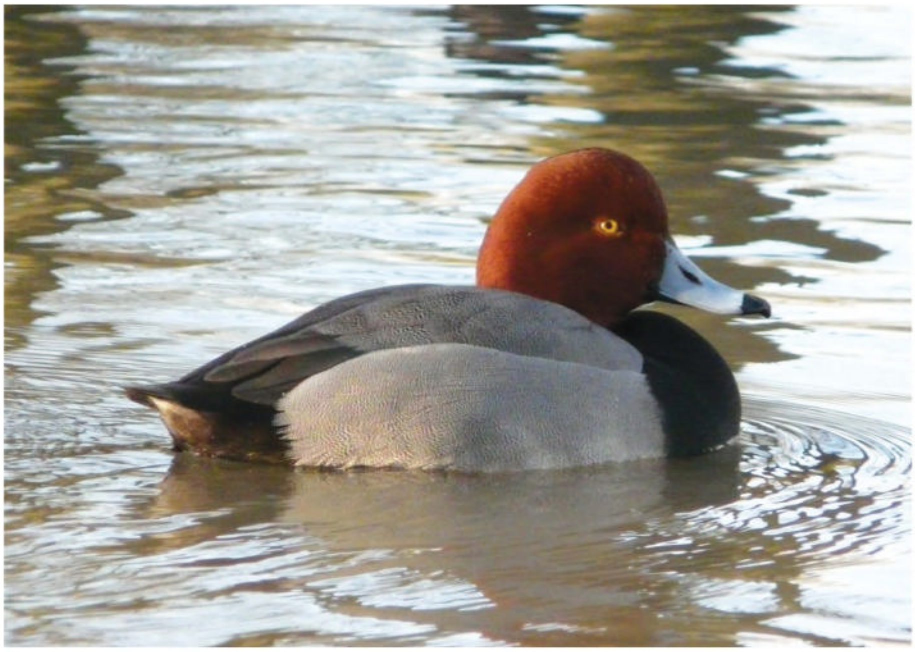

STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

TWO: Adult male Common Pochard (Seaforth, Lancashire, 1 November 2005). When relaxed, the domed chestnut head is sunk into the shoulders, with the steep forehead merging into a deep-based bill, which has a distinct curvature to the upper mandible. The body itself is quite a dark shade of grey, with the feathers being finely and delicately vermiculated. As well as the red eye, the large, rather U-shaped whitish-grey patch on the upper mandible is also distinctive. In flight it has a pale grey wing-stripe. Unlike Tufted Duck A fuligula, with which it commonly associates, Common Pochard is principally vegetarian.


STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

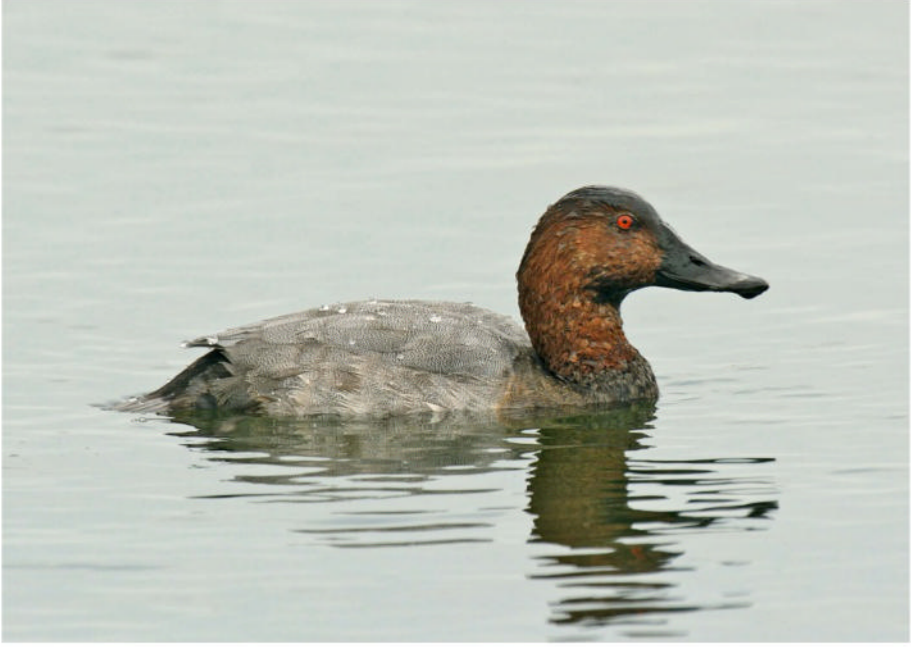
THREE: Adult male Canvasback (Welney, Norfolk, 6 February 1998). The basic similarity between this male Canvasback and the Common Pochard above is obvious – note in particular that both species have a deep red eye. However, Canvasback is distinctly larger and bulkier, with a more sharply peaked head and a long, drawn-out head and bill profile. The bill itself tapers to a longer and finer tip than that of Common Pochard. Most obviously, it is completely black in colour. Also distinctive is its much paler body plumage, but in addition note that the crown, forehead and lores are distinctly blackish in tone.

FOUR: Adult male Redhead (Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, 8 February 2013). This captive male is in fresh plumage. It does not have Common Pochard's wedged-shaped bill and head profile; instead the shallow-based bill protrudes from a near-vertical forehead. It also has a very rounded crown, nape and hind-neck, producing an overall impression that is reminiscent of Greater Scaup. The bill colour and pattern also differ from Common Pochard: a large, black 'dipped-in-ink' tip and a pale blue base, with an ill-defined narrow white subterminal band behind the tip. Note also its orangey-yellow eye. The body plumage is a much darker grey than that of drake Common Pochard.



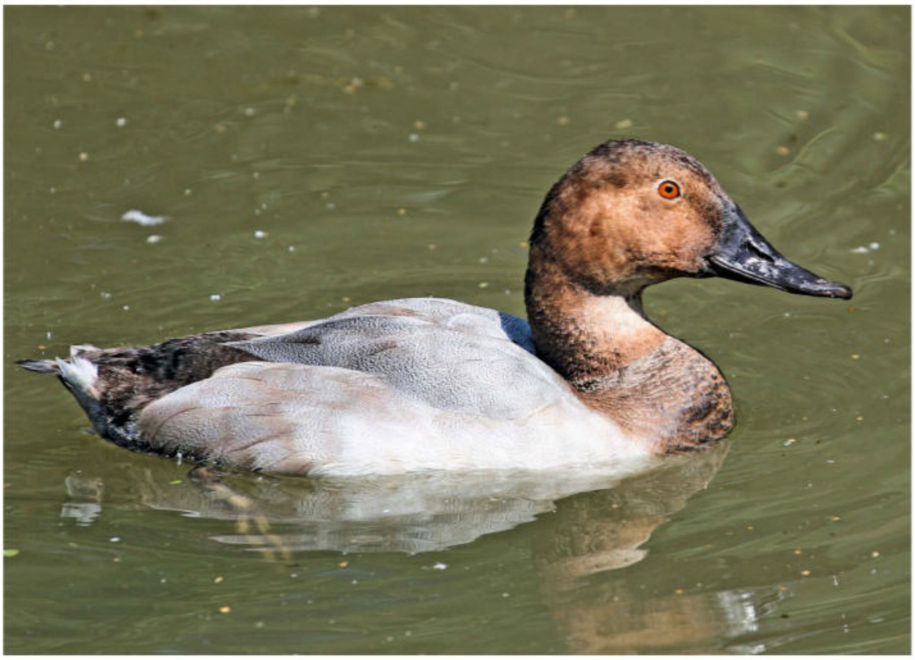
KEITH VINICOMBE

FIVE: Eclipse male Common Pochard (Seaforth, Lancashire, 23 August 2013). This male Common Pochard is in eclipse plumage, which is seen in late summer. In basic pattern and colour, this is similar to full plumage, but it is much duller and 'messier' looking, lacking both the brightness and the strong contrasts of full plumage. If in doubt, males at this time can be easily sexed as they retain their red eye throughout eclipse but, to all intents and purposes, they lose the large whitish patch behind the bill tip.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

SIX: Eclipse male Canvasback (Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, 22 July 2014). Eclipse Canvasbacks are also much duller than in full plumage, this captive bird showing brown fringing to its breast feathers and brown feathering in its flanks and scapulars. Unlike Common Pochard, however, eclipse male Canvasbacks are much more like their respective females, acquiring a paler buffy-brown head with a subdued eyering and a 'tear line' behind the eye. However, like eclipse male Common Pochards, they retain a red eye, so any red-eyed female-type 'pochard' in late summer would be worth a second look. At this time, the pale body, larger size and structural differences should also attract attention.



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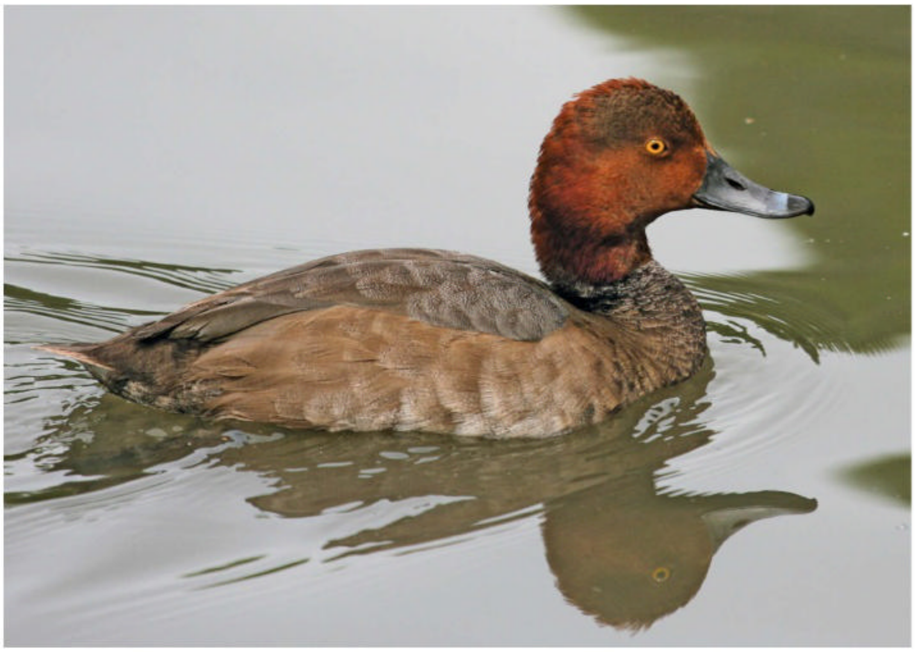
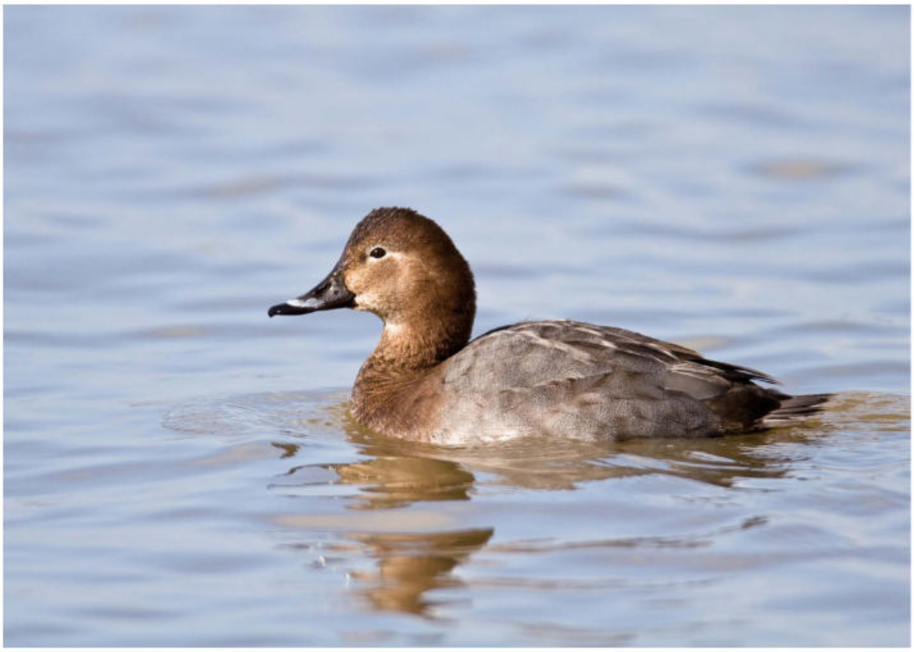


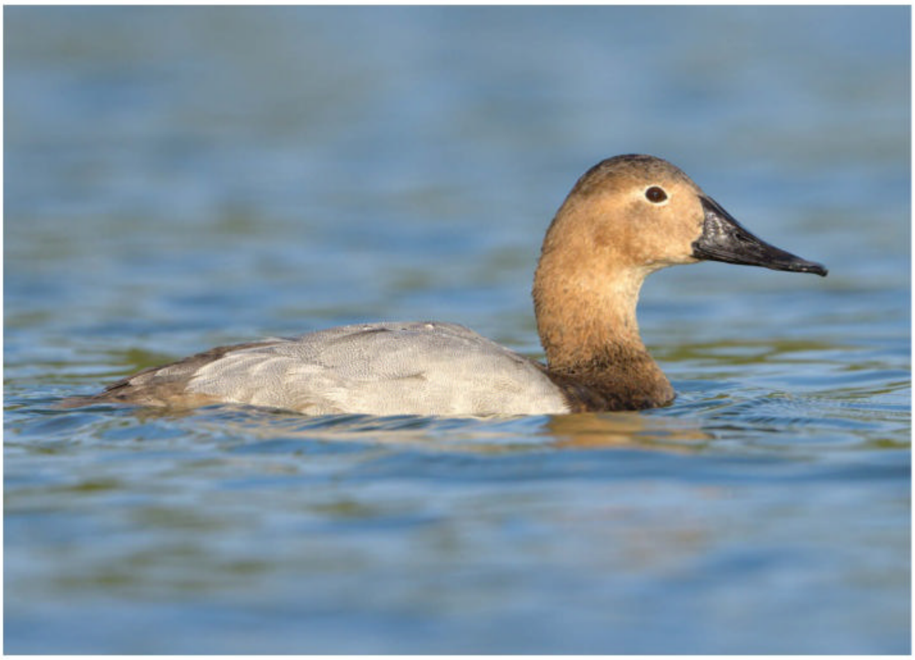
DAVE KEY

SEVEN: Eclipse male Redhead (Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, 26 July 2013). Male Redheads in eclipse, like this captive bird, become much more female-like than either Common Pochard or Canvasback. Although they retain their reddish-brown head, it is duller and suffused with black, particularly on the crown. The breast is subdued by buff feather fringing and the body, too, becomes very brown – darker above – with delicately mottled pale grey feather fringes. The bill pattern is heavily subdued, with only a faint greyish band behind the large black tip. The eye remains orangey-yellow and is thus more obvious than the red eyes of eclipse drake Common Pochard and Canvasback.



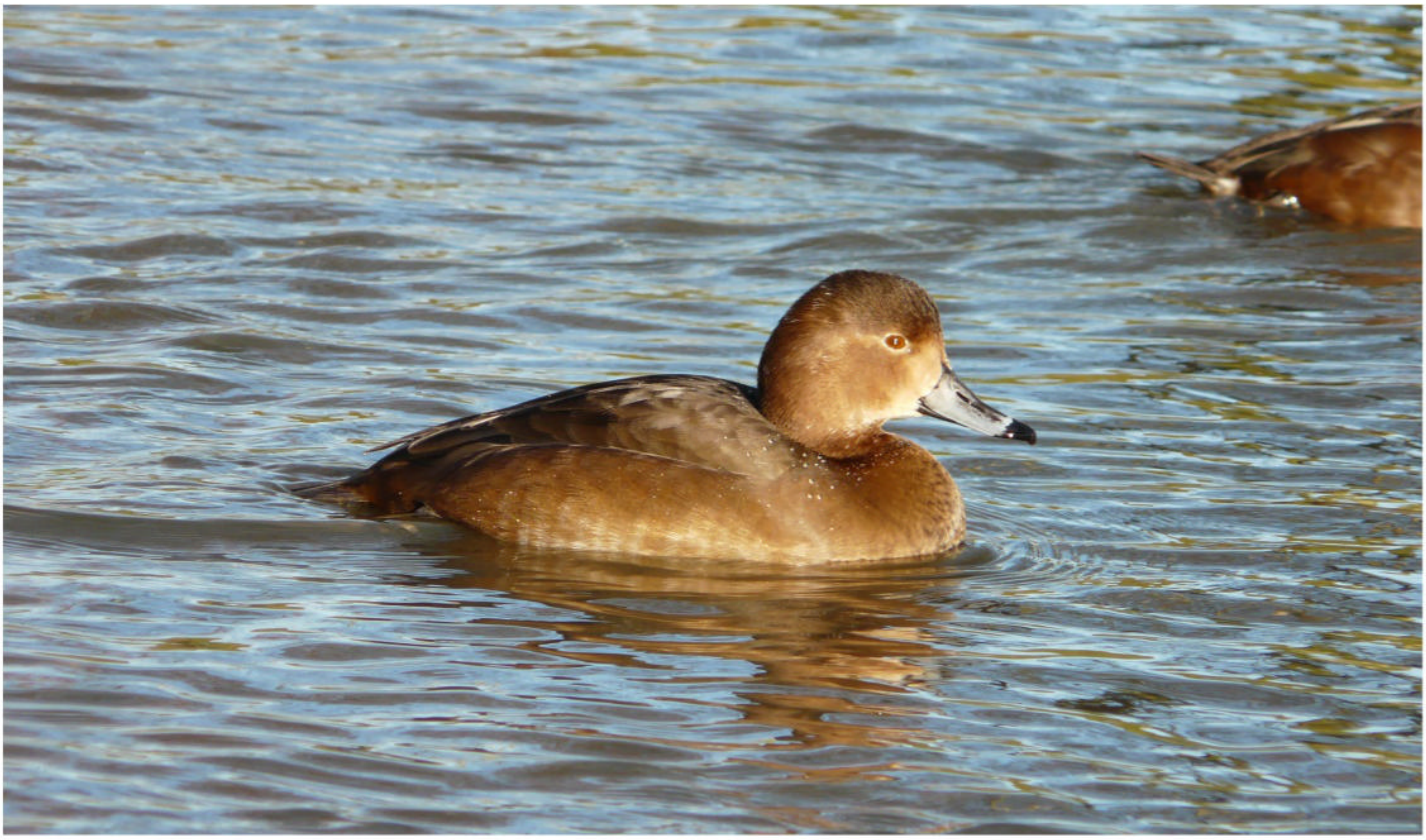
HOWARD BOTTRELL (WWW.ECOVISUALS.COM)

EIGHT: Female Common Pochard (Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, 6 March 2007). Female Common Pochards in non-breeding plumage resemble males in that they have pale grey flanks and upperparts, but the breast is a duller blackish-brown and the head is also brown with a whitish eyering and 'tear line' behind the eye, as well as a whitish chin and throat. This plumage is lost during a spring body moult, summer female Common Pochards then becoming uniformly dark brown, with only a faint pale eyering, a buffish throat and variable subdued faint whitish-buff fringing to the scapular and flank feathers. In winter, females show a large whitish patch behind the bill tip but, in breeding condition, the bill becomes completely blackish.



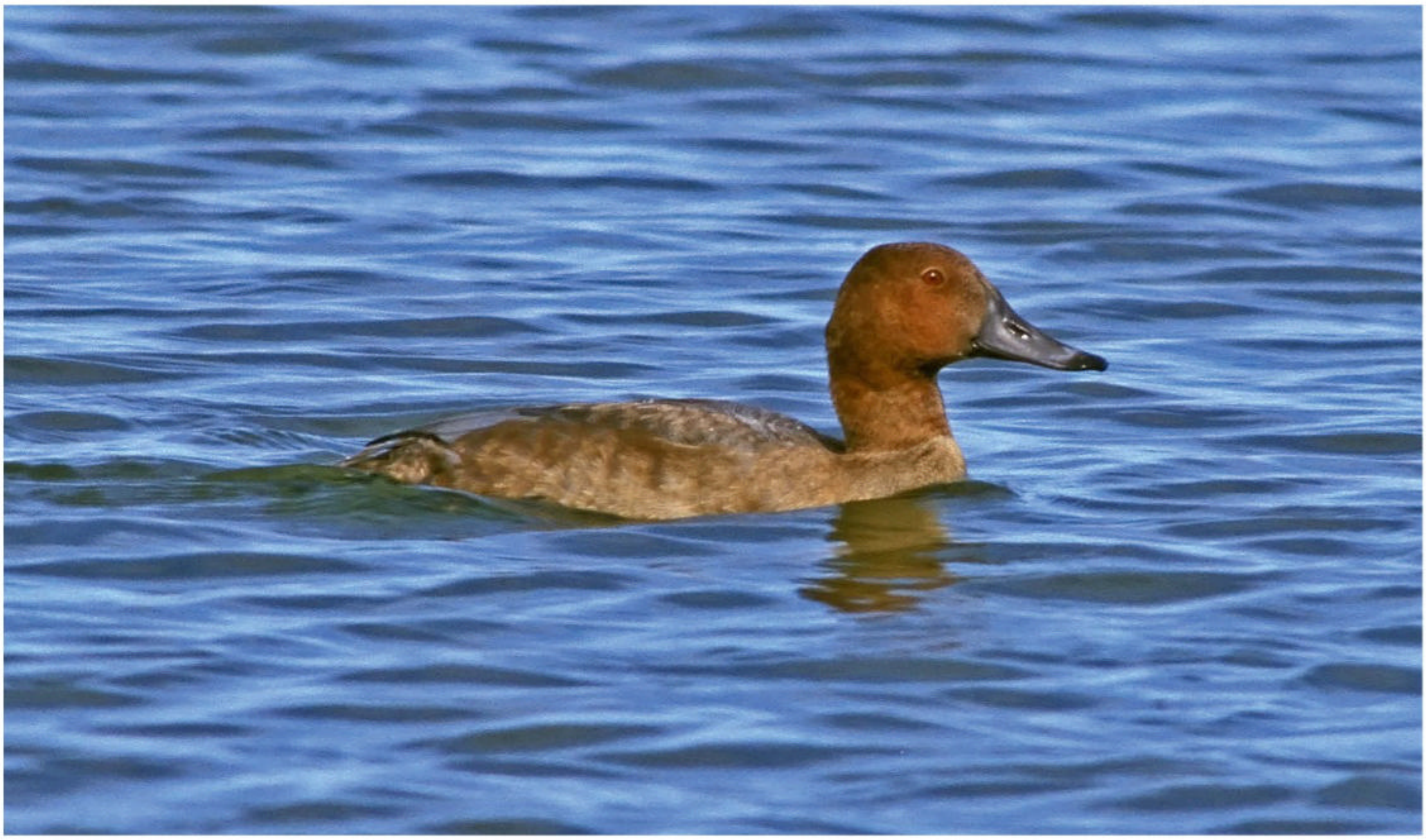
TIM ZUROWSKI (WWW.BIRDIMAGENCY.COM)

NINE: Female Canvasback (California, USA, 1 February 2015). Female Canvasbacks in winter are similar to female Common Pochard in basic pattern, but their plumage is paler, with a gingery-brown head with a whitish eyering, a buffish 'tear line' and obviously paler whitish-grey flanks and upperparts. Some are distinctly paler than others, with extensive swathes of whitish on the head and foreneck. At this time of year their larger size, bulkier body, longer neck and long 'stretched-out' bill and head profile are fundamental to their identification. Unlike Common Pochard, the bill remains completely black at all times. Like Common Pochard, females acquire a uniformly rich brown summer plumage.



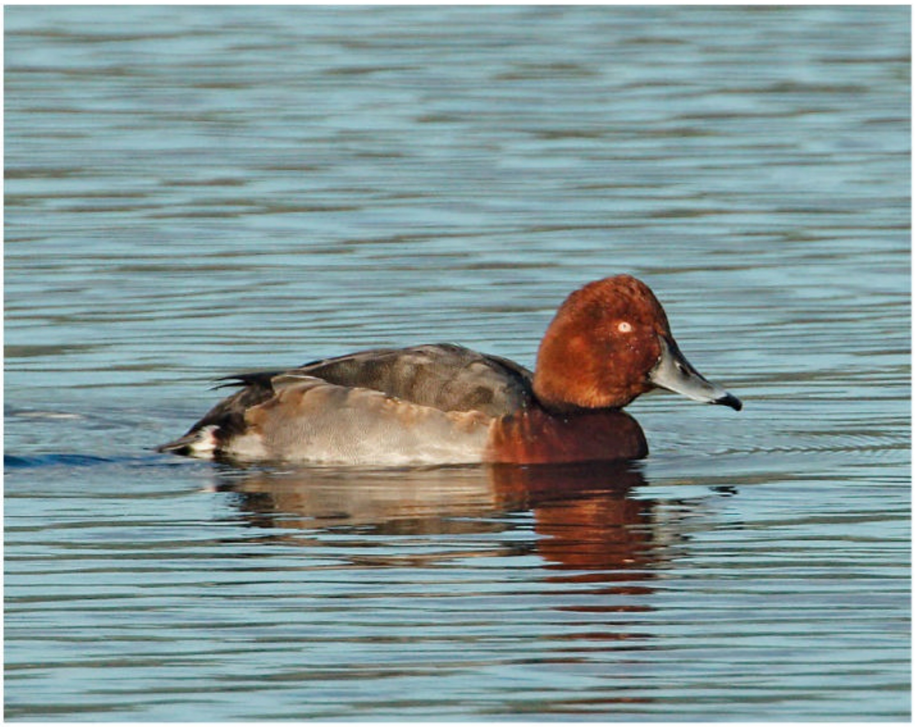
KEITH VINICOMBE

TEN: Female Redhead (Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, 10 December 2012). As this captive bird shows, female Redhead differs from the other two species in that its body does not turn grey in winter – it has a uniformly rich brown body throughout the year. In fresh plumage, it has buff lores and throat, a whitish eyering and a short buff 'tear line' behind the eye. The bill is similar to the male's, with a 'dipped-in-ink' black tip and a pale grey base, with a variable amount of blackish mottling in the centre of the upper mandible. Its general appearance, shape and structure – steep forehead, rounded head and stocky body – may bring to mind a juvenile Greater Scaup.



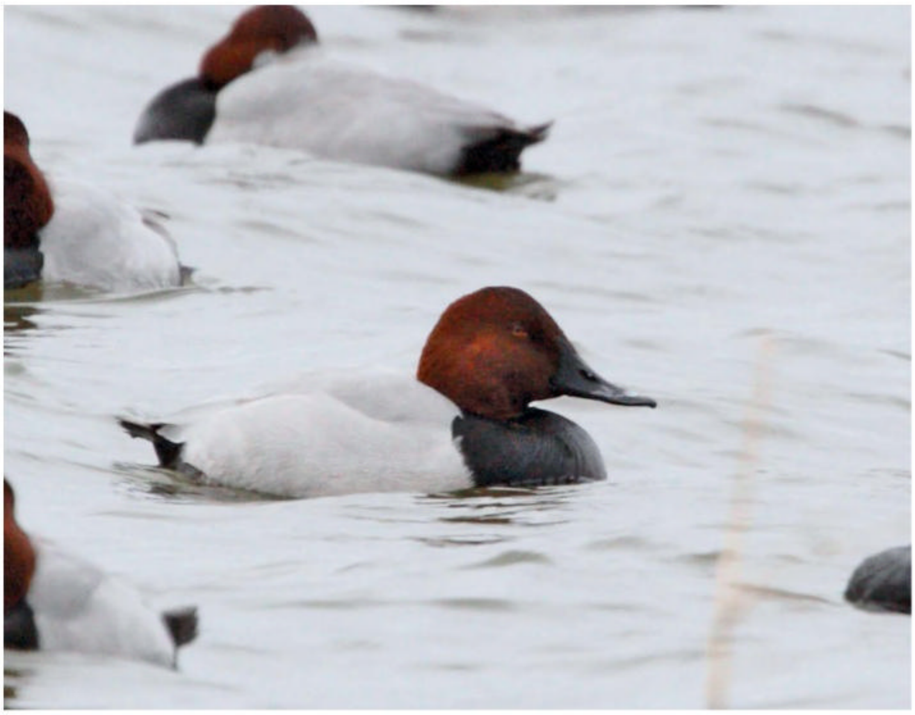
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

ELEVEN: First-winter Common Pochard (Seaforth, Lancashire, 4 September 1999). Like summer-plumaged females, juvenile Common Pochards are uniformly brown, but are much fresher looking. However, in August-September, juvenile males moult into a 'first-winter' plumage which mirrors that of the adult male except that it is duller and much more subdued. They then show a dull chestnut head with a very dull red eye and a dull grey bill with a subdued pattern. Both the breast and the belly are blackish, but this colour is variably obscured by thick buffy feather fringes. As the brown juvenile body plumage is replaced, the upperparts and flanks gradually become greyer. This plumage is not well known because it does not last long, the birds becoming much more adult-like by late autumn.



ALAN TATE

TWELVE: Ferruginous Duck x Common Pochard hybrid (Kenfig Pool, Mid Glamorgan, 18 October 2004). With its dark grey upperparts and flanks this moulting bird superficially resembles a Redhead, but there are a number of features that are incompatible with that species: a highly domed head, a piercing yellow eye, a curved Common Pochard-like upper mandible, a curved rear edge to the black bill tip and a chestnut breast. In combination, all these features indicate that it is a Pochard x Ferruginous Duck hybrid, examples of which are surprisingly frequent. The white patch on the sides of the undertail coverts would also support this identification (if the tail were raised, the entire undertail coverts would no doubt appear white).



R M ANDREWS

THIRTEEN: Canvasback x Common Pochard (Chew Valley Lake, Somerset, 31 December 2002). This notorious bird closely resembled a Canvasback, but the body wasn't quite pale enough, the forehead and fore-crown not quite black enough and the bill not quite long enough. In addition, it consistently showed small white markings behind the bill tip, while the line of demarcation between the black breast and pale grey fore-flanks was vertical, rather than sloping. All these features suggested that it was not a pure bird, a view that was eventually confirmed when it came to light that a wild Common Pochard had paired with a captive female Canvasback just across the Severn Estuary, at Roath Park Lake in Cardiff.

## Find your own pochards

Common Pochard is a near-ubiquitous inhabitant of most of Britain's open water habitats, and as such is likely to grace even the most lowly of local patches with its presence on occasion. It prefers lakes and ponds with a dense underwater flora, and still builds up substantially in numbers during autumn despite its documented decline.

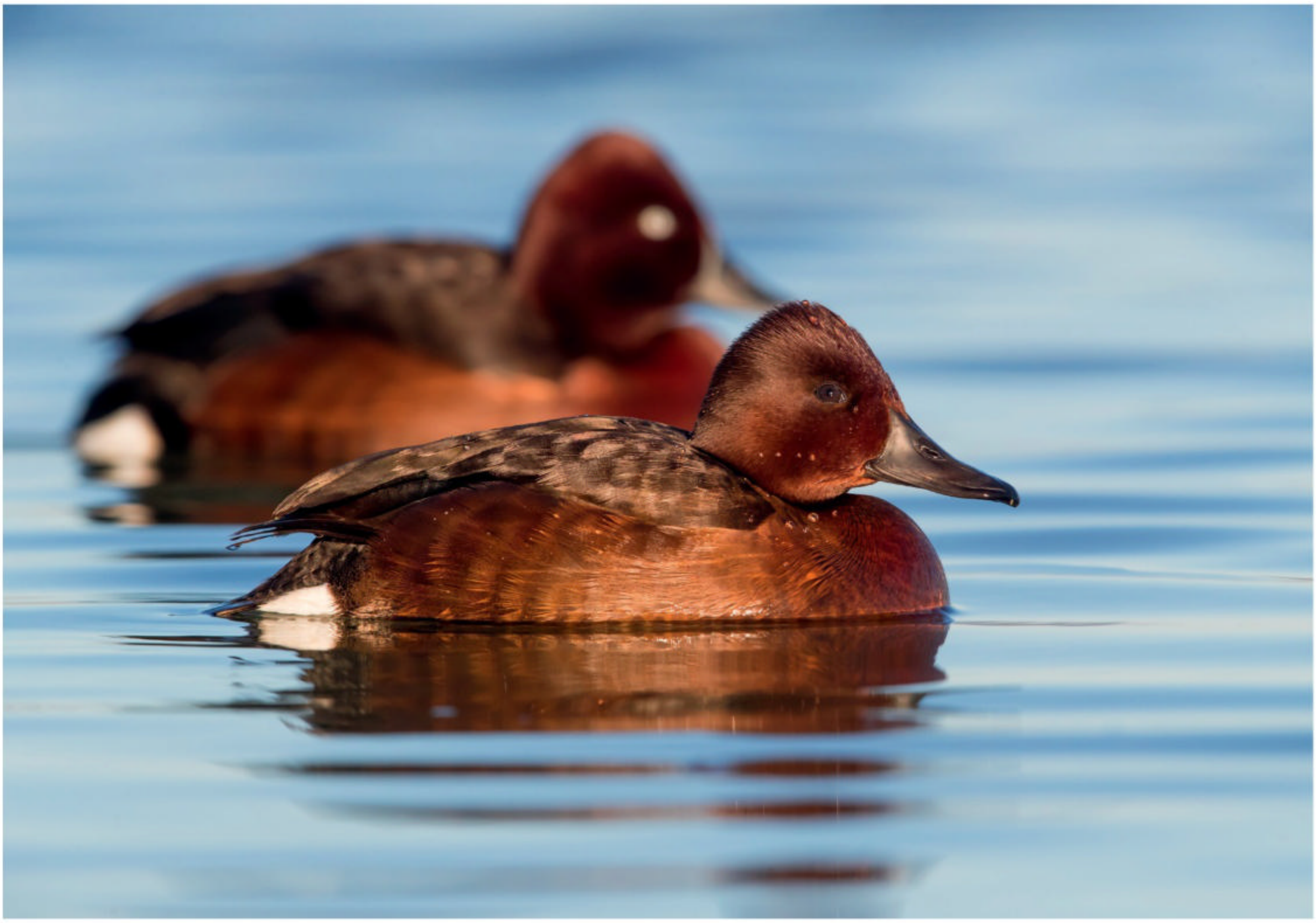
The two similar American species, however, are an entirely different proposition. Redhead – with only one accepted record in Britain, from the East Midlands – has yet to establish an occurrence pattern.

Canvasback, with seven British records, has occurred mostly on the east coast, bar one each in Orkney and Cornwall.

Despite this, the most likely places to find these extremely rare species must be the west coast and Northern Isles. Good luck!

# Ferruginous Duck

Words by Dominic Mitchell



DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

ONE: Adult female (foreground) and adult male Ferruginous Ducks (Florence, Italy, 11 March 2017). This beautiful portrait shows that despite its essentially brown plumage, Ferruginous Duck can look surprisingly bright – indeed almost colourful – in strong sunlight, when the reddish and mahogany tones are at their most eyecatching. In all plumages the white undertail coverts, unmarked in adults, are the stand-out contrasting feature. Note the richer tones of the male in the background and also its white eye; the iris is brown in females.

Rare, scarce, hybrid, escape … there are many factors complicating the status and identification of Ferruginous Duck in Britain and Ireland. This infrequent visitor, currently considered an official rarity, could turn up almost anywhere and has the potential to be overlooked among rafts of wildfowl on reservoirs, lakes and gravel pits. Dominic Mitchell assesses the confusion risks, which range from other more familiar diving ducks to an array of hybrids and potentially even exotic escapes, to help you find your own this winter.

# Basic Principles

Ferruginous Duck is an increasingly rare visitor to Britain and Ireland from the Continent, and a great find on any local patch. Although relatively distinctive in appearance, it can be overlooked among rafts of Tufted Duck and Common Pochard, and the possibility of hybrids and escapes also needs to be considered.

The species' large but somewhat fragmented breeding range extends from central, eastern and south-eastern Europe through Turkey and parts of the Middle East to Central Asia and China. In the Mediterranean there are isolated breeding pockets westwards to Spain, where it is very rare, and also from Libya to Morocco; it occasionally breeds in France (Mitchell 2017, Reeber 2015). Its winter range is more extensive, but it is still absent from much of north-west Europe.

In Britain, the status of 'Fudge Duck' has see-sawed between official rarity and scarcity. It was not considered by the Rarities Committee between 1969 and 1998, on the basis that it was impossible to estimate how many related to wild individuals as opposed to widely kept, free-flying birds from collections (Vinicombe 2000). It rejoined the list of species assessed from 1999, only to be taken off again from 2006. But from 1 January 2017 records have again been considered by the Rarities Committee.

Its less frequent British appearances, which are mostly in the eastern half of England, reflect rapid and large-scale declines in continental Europe (BirdLife International 2018), but in contrast to the general trend the species may have bred in Avon in 2003, 2004 and 2006 (Davis and Vinicombe 2011). It is a much rarer bird in Ireland, with just 35 records in total, the last from Wexford in January 2011 (Fahy 2012, Hobbs 2018).

Appearances in Britain can be complicated by occasional 'fence-hoppers' from collections. The species is common in captivity and breeds readily (Reeber 2015), and a penchant for escaping in western Europe is evidenced by confiding or colour-ringed individuals at large. A colour ring is not automatically damning of origin, as there are three projects in Spain where birds are marked with white rings. However, a reintroduction programme in north-west Germany uses yellow rings, and this is now known to be the source of three individuals which put in a prolonged recent stay at Dinton Pastures Country Park, Berkshire (Walford 2017). As some collections also mark their birds with colour rings (often uncoded), it is important to try to confirm the presence of a ring and any code.

## Identification

In all plumages, Ferruginous Duck is essentially dark brown or reddish-brown with white undertail coverts. Males are brighter and more richly toned, appearing more reddish or with deep chestnut or mahogany hues, especially in bright sunlight. Females are darker and duller but may also seem reddish tinged in good light, while juveniles are dullest brown overall.

Broad white wing-bars across the secondaries and primaries are striking in flight, as are white underwings and (in adults) bellies. Adult males are distinctively white eyed, whereas females and juveniles have browner eyes which appear dark at any distance. The head shape is rather peaked and the longish bill is grey, becoming paler behind a black nail.

The possibility of confusion with female and especially juvenile Tufted Duck, and with certain hybrids, is the main risk. Tufted Duck typically shows at least a hint of a tuft in these plumages, and more often than not an obvious short tuft on the hindcrown. This may be flattened in birds that are diving repeatedly, however, or not visible at all when they are asleep. Some Tufteds also show white undertail coverts, further recalling Ferruginous Duck, and occasional females can appear more warmly toned than the typical dark earth-brown hues of this species. The slightly shorter white wing-bar (not extending to the outermost primaries), squarer head shape, yellow iris and different bill pattern should help separate most problematic Tufteds.

A greater risk comes from hybrids, especially Common Pochard x Ferruginous Duck, but also Tufted Duck x Ferruginous Duck. Presumably, back-crosses between hybrids and all three species also occur.

## Exotics

Exotic species which have escaped from captivity may also need to be considered, particularly two Antipodean *Aythyas*.

New Zealand Scaup is a recognised escape on Category E of the British Ornithologists' Union's British list. It has broadly similar plumage tones to Ferruginous Duck, but lacks the white undertail and has a more extensive black bill-tip. Additionally, adult males have a blue-green head sheen and females often a white 'nose band', recalling female Tufted.

More closely resembling Ferruginous Duck is Hardhead (or White-eyed Pochard), a species native to Australia and kept in captivity, though not yet listed in Category E. It is a relatively large *Aythya*, with rich brown head and body plumage and white belly, undertail, wing-bar and eye colour all recalling Ferruginous. Other than size the key distinction is bill pattern, Hardhead having a dark greyish bill with a broad pale bluish band across the tip and a black nail.

Interestingly, New Zealand Scaup is known to have hybridised with Ferruginous Duck and particularly Hardhead in captivity, so in theory some nightmarish *Aythya* crosses exist. In practice, however, you are much more likely to need to separate a candidate Ferruginous Duck from its commoner native congeners or their hybrids.

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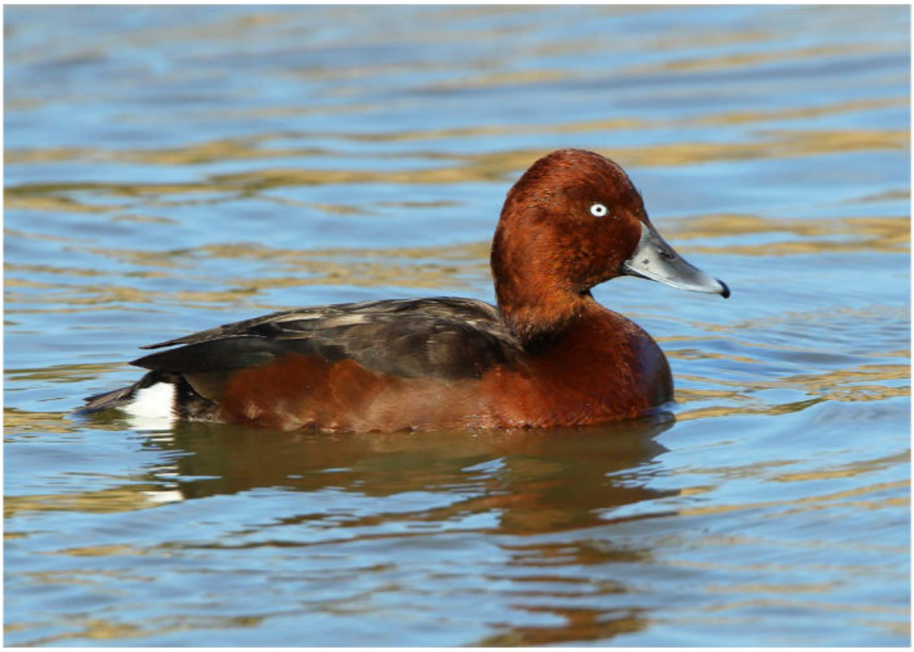
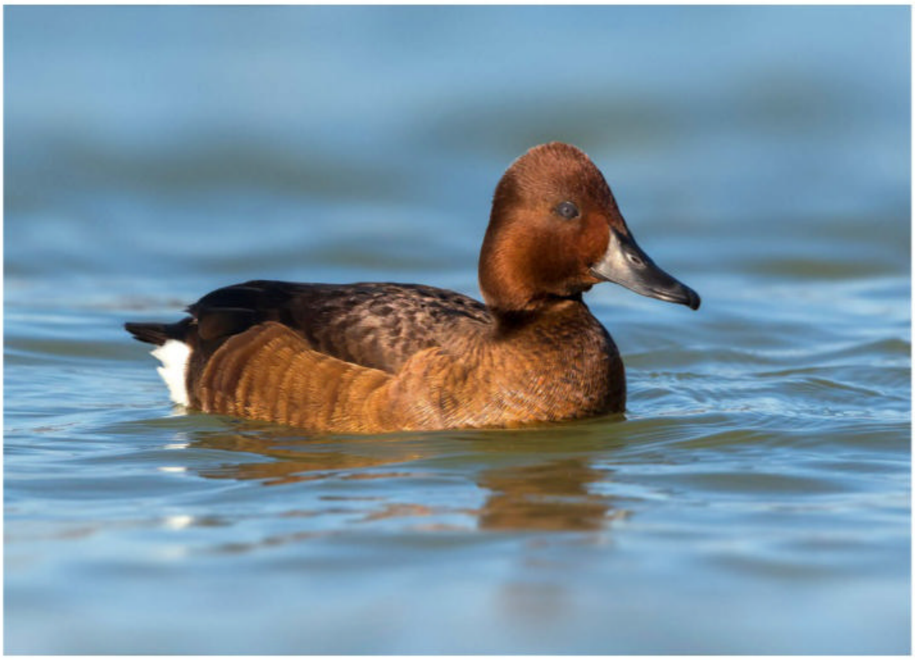
**With thanks to Sébastien Reeber for his comments on the hybrid bird in photo 12**

TWO: Adult male Ferruginous Duck (Camargue, France, 10 December 2011). A close-up view reveals that, as well as the male's distinctive white iris, the mantle and scapulars are somewhat darker brown than the rest of the plumage. It's only hinted at in this image, but there is a narrow dark neck collar, most visible when the neck is outstretched. Note also that the white undertail coverts are framed by black, and the bill is lead-grey with a fine black nail.



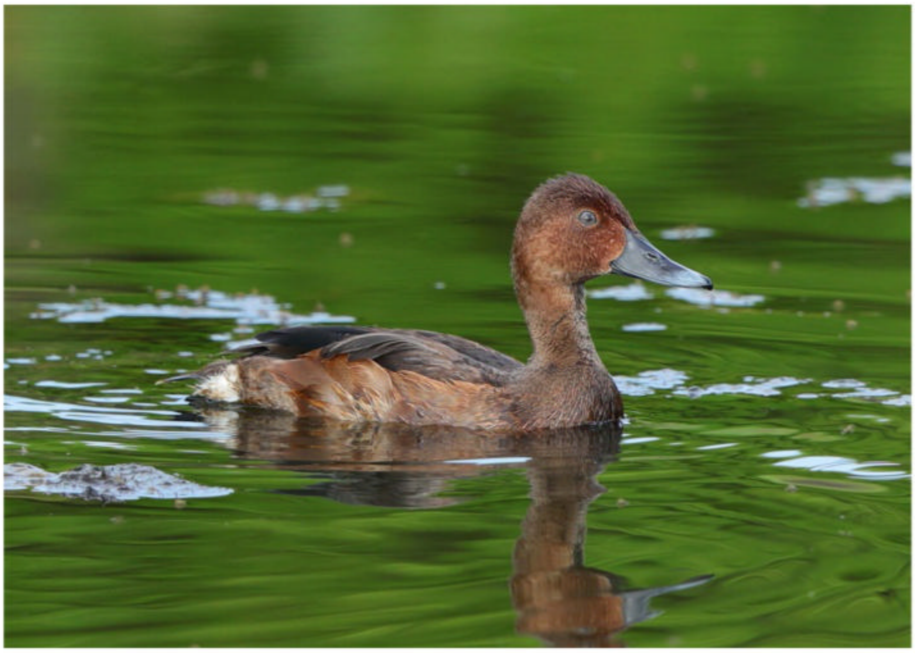
AURÉLIEN AUDEVARD

THREE: Adult female Ferruginous Duck (Florence, Italy, 27 December 2017). Overall the sexes are similar, but females are a duller brown with reduced reddish tones. The brown iris immediately confirms this bird is a female, but note also that the bill is a darker grey than the male's in photo 2 above, albeit still with a blackish nail.

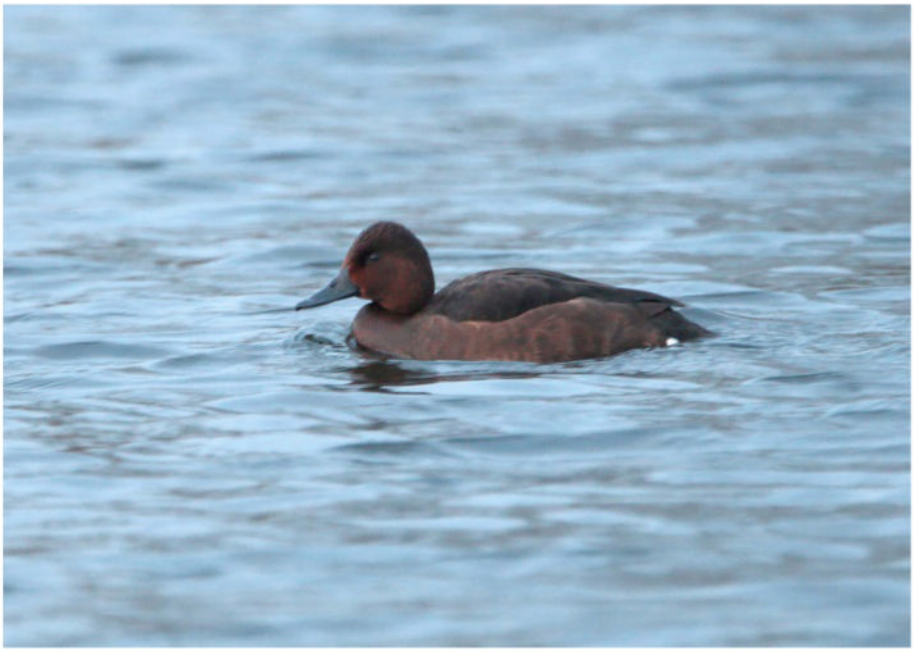


DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

FOUR: Juvenile Ferruginous Duck (Camargue, France, 5 August 2018). Juveniles have the dullest brown plumage, and young birds are therefore most likely to be overlooked or mistaken for female or juvenile Tufted Duck. However, there are still slight reddish hues in the plumage, while the black nail on the dark grey bill confirms this is the rarer species. This bird can be aged as a juvenile by the 'sullied' white undertail coverts and sepia iris.

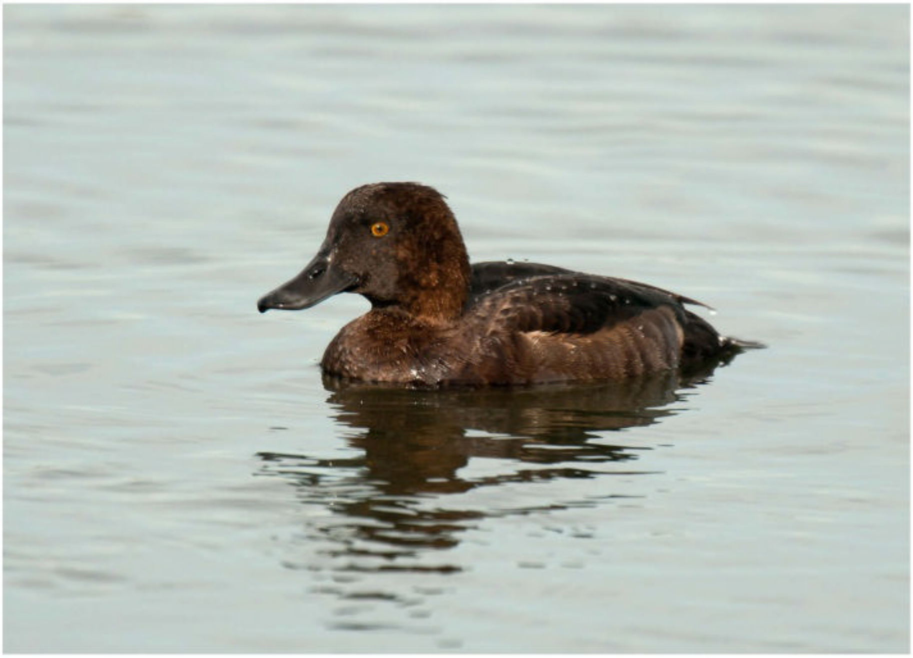


AURÉLIEN AUDEVARD



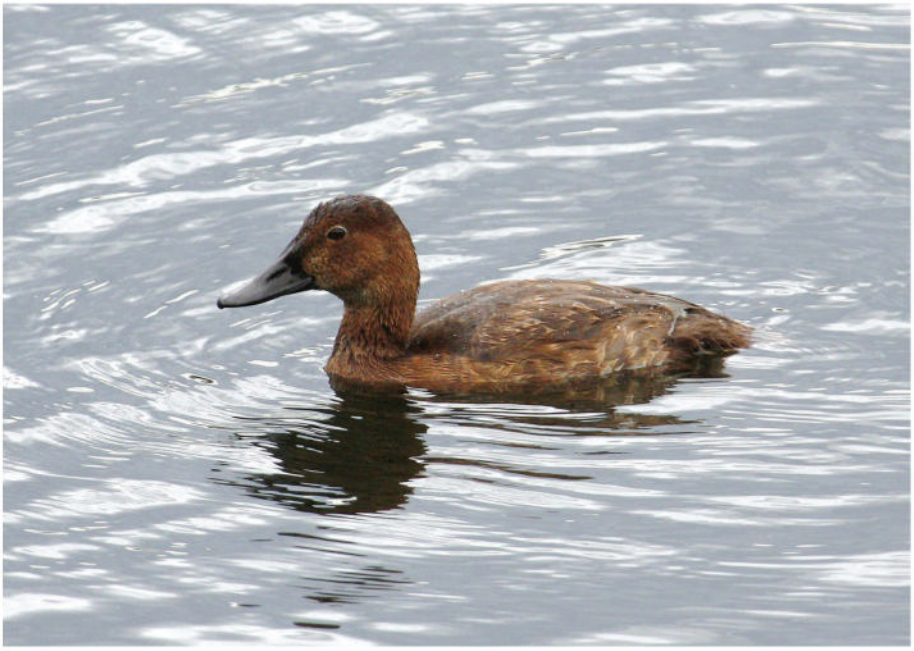
JAMES LOWEN (WWW.JAMESLOWEN.COM)

FIVE: First-winter female Ferruginous Duck (Burgess Park, Greater London, 28 November 2010). With its tail pressed down into the water and white undertail coverts barely visible, this bird appears featureless and drab. The body is dark brown and the head darker still, though with a slightly reddish hue. Eye colour points away from Tufted Duck and so too does structure, this bird showing the typical peaked crown profile of Ferruginous Duck. Size can't be judged in this image, but in real life this bird was slightly smaller than nearby Tufted Ducks, with a somewhat narrower bill.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

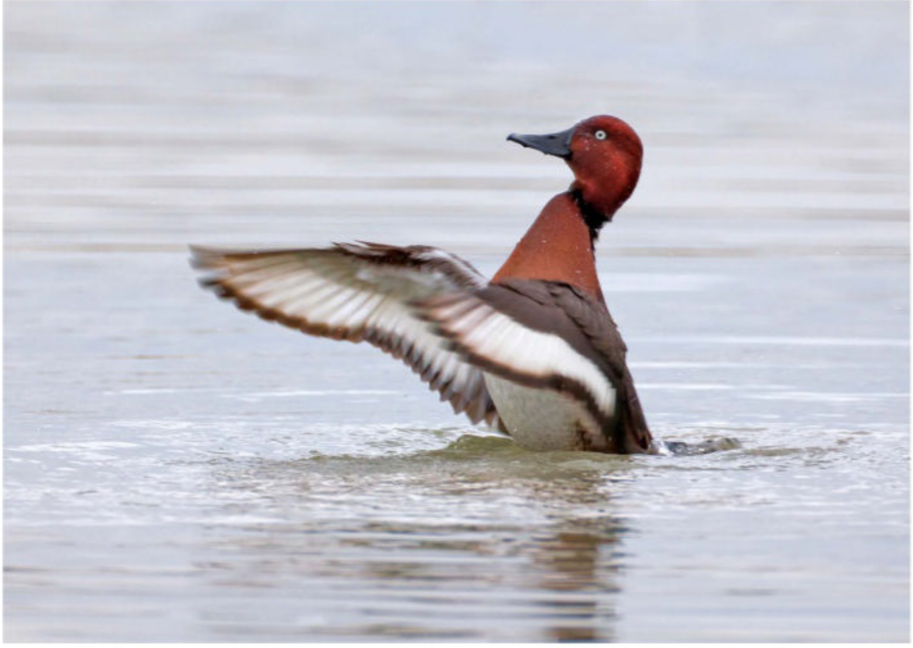
SIX: Juvenile/first-winter Tufted Duck (Seaforth, Lancashire, 7 October 2009). This bird has clearly been diving actively, so while there is little suggestion of a tuft the feathers on the back of the head are wet and flattened down. The undertail seems dark, but at this angle it is difficult to be certain. However, the yellowy-brown iris, broad bill lacking a discrete dark nail and the squarish rather than peaked head shape all point to a young Tufted Duck.



JAMES HANLON (JAMESHANLON.WEBFLOW.IO)

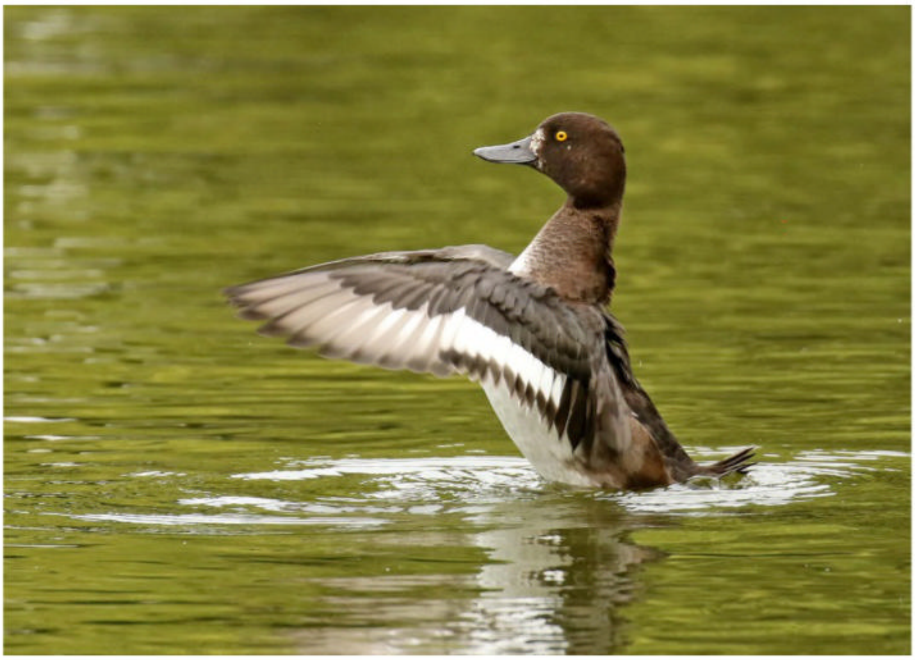
SEVEN: Juvenile Common Pochard (Rye Meads RSPB, Hertfordshire, 6 August 2011). The rather uniform tones of this juvenile Aythya might well attract attention – compare it to the similar juvenile Ferruginous Duck in photo four. However, it is slightly paler and lacking in distinct reddish hues, the bill is a dull dark grey with no contrasting black nail, and most importantly the undertail coverts are not white, yet the tail-tip is paler – all features indicative of juvenile Common Pochard.

EIGHT: Adult male Ferruginous Duck (Florence, Italy, 15 March 2011). When wing-flapping or in flight, Ferruginous Duck transforms into a bird of striking contrasts. There is extensive white in the wings, with a broad white bar across the primaries and secondaries offset by dark brown coverts and trailing edge, dark-framed whitish underwings and a clean white belly in adults (buffer and dark spotted in juveniles).



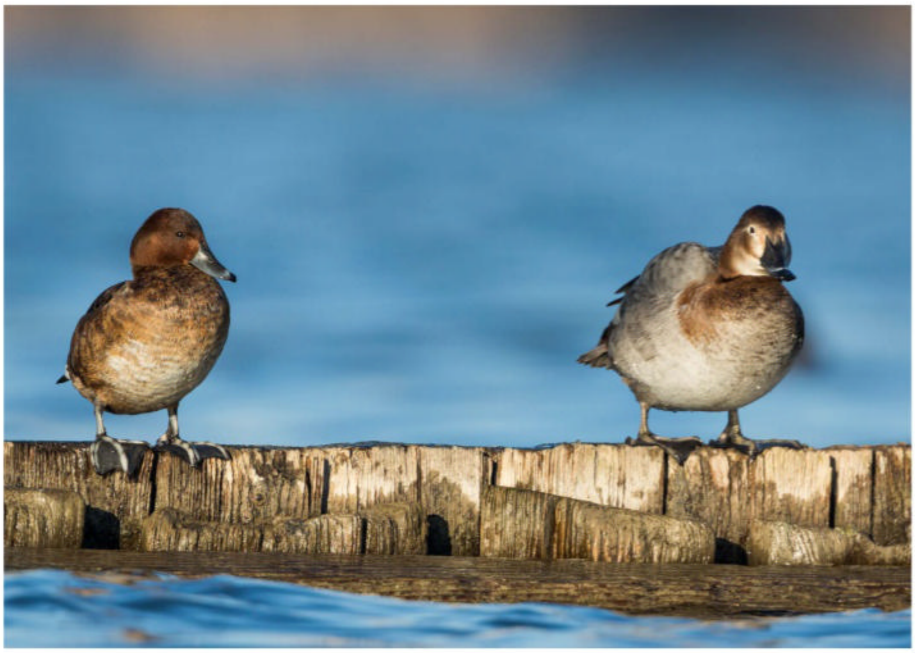
DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

NINE: Adult female Tufted Duck (Alexandra Park, Greater London, 16 September 2018). The overall plumage pattern is very similar to Ferruginous Duck, with bold white wing-bars extending across the secondaries and most of the primaries, whitish underwings (not visible here) and a clean white belly patch. The plumage is dark earth-brown rather than reddish-brown, however, while the whitish 'noseband' feathering and bright yellow iris confirms this to be an adult female Tufted Duck.

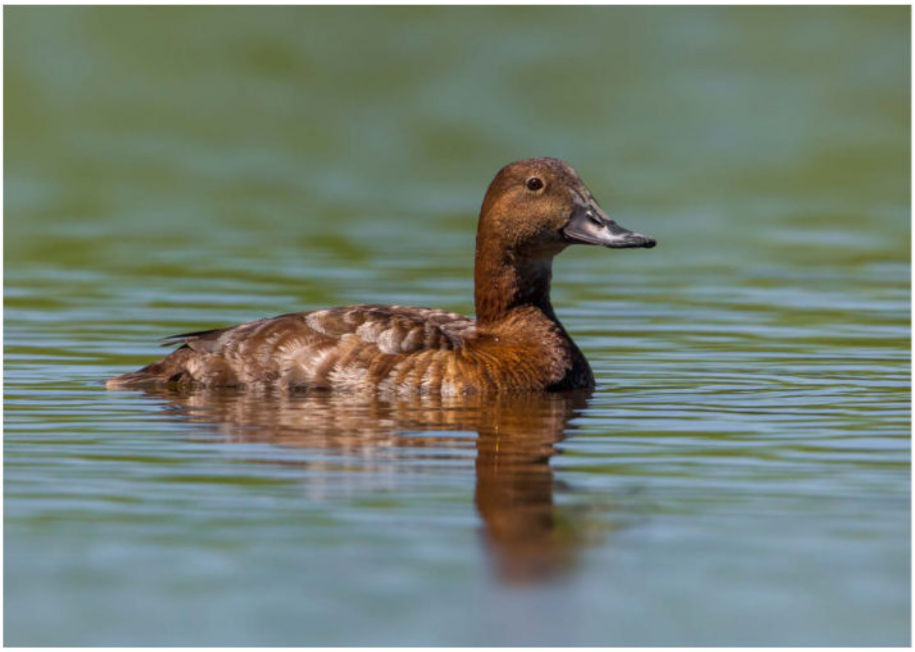


DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM)

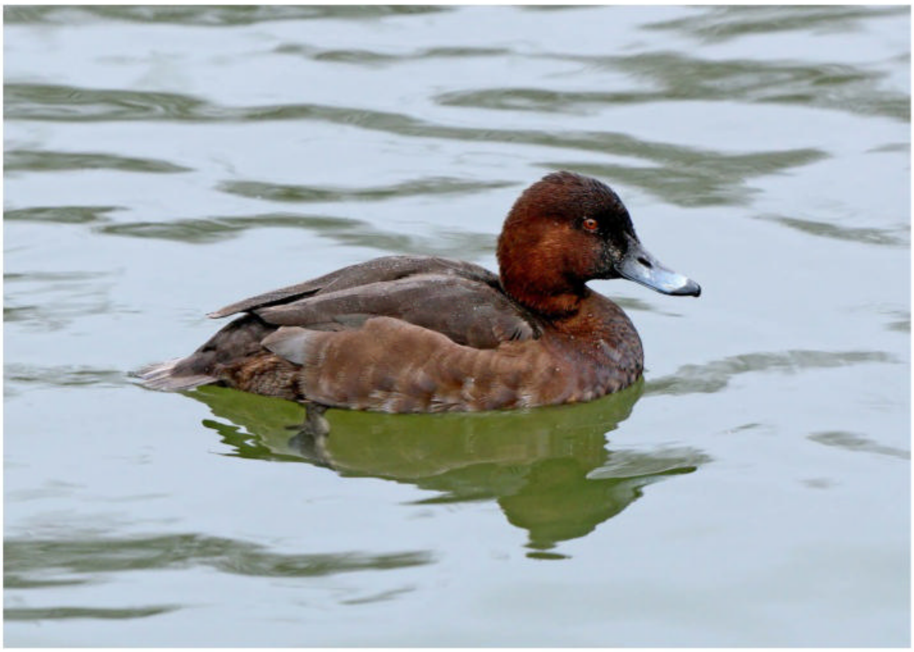
TEN: First-winter female Ferruginous Duck (left) with first-winter female Common Pochard (Germany, 25 February 2015). Ferruginous Duck is closer in shape to Common Pochard than to Tufted Duck, but is smaller and less bulky than both. The difference is discernible in this image, which shows a rather nondescript Ferruginous Duck with its commoner congener. Its dull brown plumage and lack of a clear white belly patch age it as a first-winter, while the brown iris in late winter indicates a female; note also that the black on the tip of the bill extends to the sides of the nail, as is typical for immatures of this species.



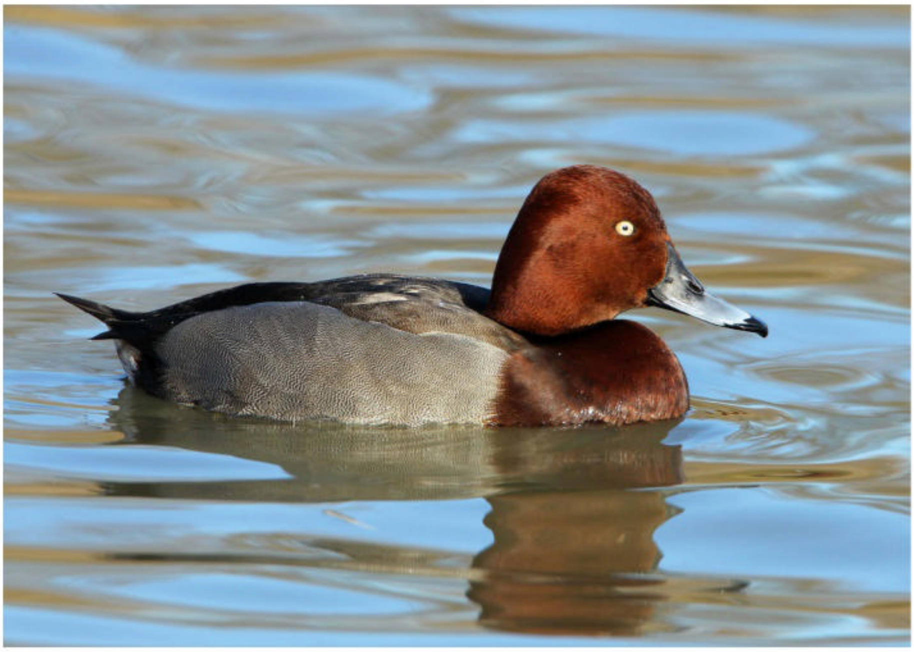
RALPH MARTIN (WWW.AGAMI.NL)


DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

ELEVEN: Female Common Pochard (Florence, Italy, 13 May 2013). Although the head and breast are rather uniformly brown, the flanks and upperparts are mixed with paler, greyer feathers – not a feature of Ferruginous Duck at any age. With the tail held down onto the water the undertail coverts are largely hidden, but the bill pattern and structure, as well as head shape, confirm this is a female Common Pochard.


DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM)

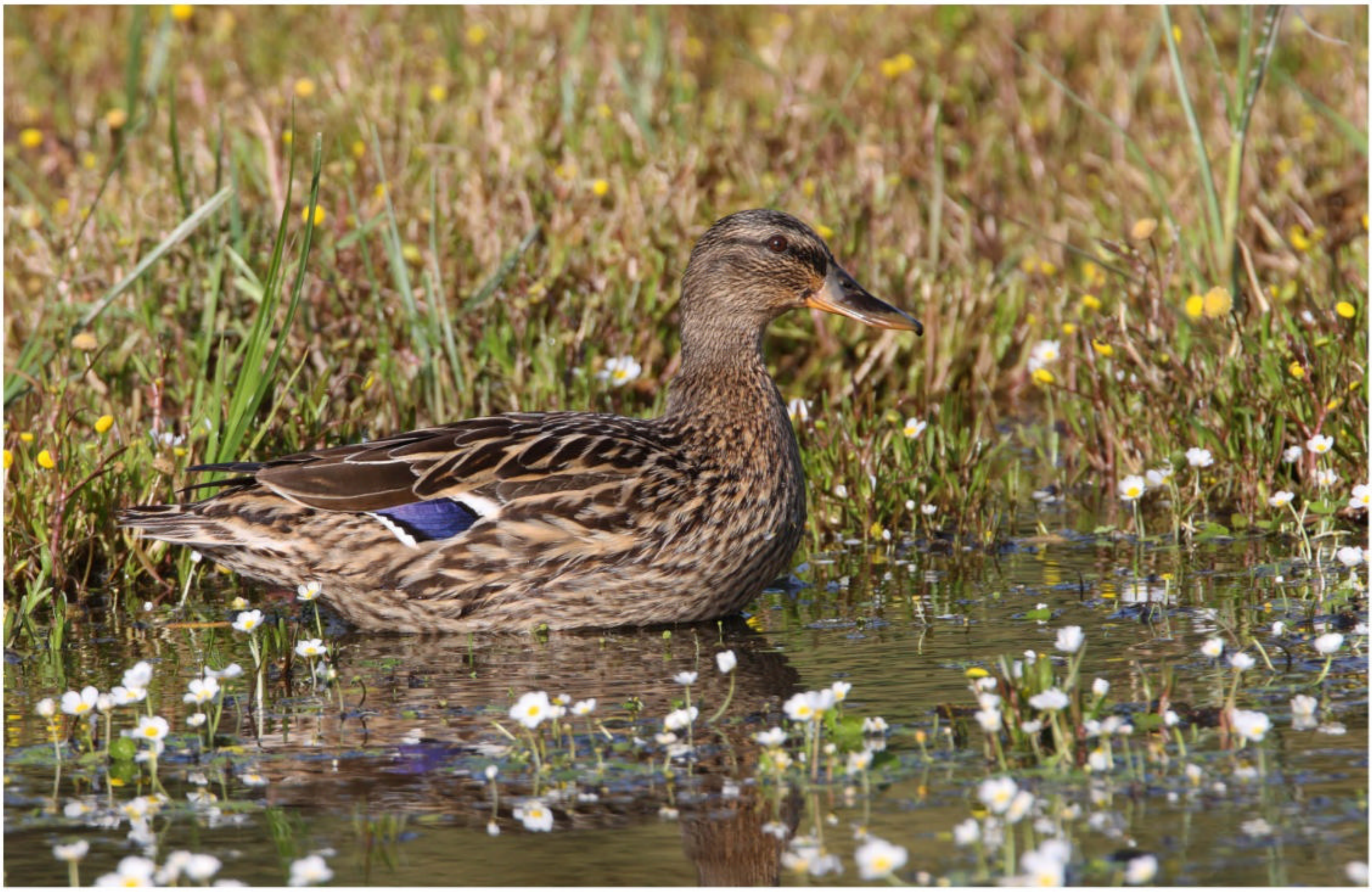
TWELVE: Hybrid Ferruginous Duck x Common Pochard (Alexandra Park, Greater London, 26 March 2015). In western Europe, Ferruginous-like hybrids are said to be commoner than pure individuals. The reddish-brown plumage of this Aythya indicates Ferruginous Duck influence and suggest a female, yet the reddish iris and blue-grey bill with a paler subterminal area behind a broad black tip are characters of male Common Pochard. Determining the exact parentage – and sometimes sex – of such birds can be difficult, and this may be an 'intersex' hybrid or an old female.


AURÉLIEN AUDEVARD

THIRTEEN: Hybrid Ferruginous Duck x Common Pochard (Alexandra Park, Greater London, 26 March 2015). In western Europe, Ferruginous-like hybrids are said to be commoner than pure individuals. The reddish-brown plumage of this Aythya indicates Ferruginous Duck influence and suggest a female, yet the reddish iris and blue-grey bill with a paler subterminal area behind a broad black tip are characters of male Common Pochard. Determining the exact parentage – and sometimes sex – of such birds can be difficult, and this may be an 'intersex' hybrid or an old female.

# Female dabbling ducks

Words by Andy Stoddart



NEIL BOWMAN

ONE: Mallard (Algarve, Portugal, 8 April 2011). Female ducks are often thought of as 'brown and boring' or 'all the same', with all the attention lavished on the more richly coloured males. However, this female Mallard, resplendent in its intricately patterned feathering and shining blue speculum, helps to show that female ducks are eminently identifiable, and things of beauty too.

The 'dabbling ducks' are ubiquitous on lakes and ponds up and down the country, especially in winter when resident birds are joined by migrants from further north seeking warmer climes. But while males are distinctive, more cryptically plumaged females are much more challenging to separate. Here, Andy Stoddart provides all the information you need to identify the six regular species – Northern Pintail, Eurasian Teal, Mallard, Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon and Northern Shoveler – both in flight and on the water.

# Basic Principles

Female 'dabbling ducks' are notoriously baffling, particularly to newer birders. While the males are colourful and distinctive, the females present, by contrast, are variations on a drab brown theme and prove much more challenging to identify.

A short cut to their identification is often provided by a quick look at any accompanying males, but the females repay careful study. They are, in reality, fairly distinctive, and subtly beautiful too! This article looks at the six regularly occurring dabbling duck species in Britain.

### Northern Pintail

In most areas this is the scarcest of the species discussed here and the least likely to be seen in very large single-species flocks. In Britain it is almost exclusively encountered in winter.

When typically seen among other dabbling ducks, female Northern Pintail is large and long bodied. The tail also looks long, although the elongated central tail feathers of the male are absent. The neck can be conspicuously long and thin, especially when extended, the head is small and the bill is long and slim, with the whole effect creating a very elegant, almost swan-like impression.

The plumage is noticeably pale – a beautiful soft buffy-fawn not matched by any of the other species. The face is strikingly plain and the breast is finely speckled, while the flanks contain prominent dark scallop-shaped markings. The dark greenish speculum is bordered with white along the leading and trailing edges. The bill is dull grey.

### Eurasian Teal

Female Eurasian Teal is generally straightforward to identify. The species typically frequents large waterbodies, where it can form large, tight flocks, but it will also use small, tree-fringed pools from which its rapid take-off ability enables a quick escape. In the air Eurasian Teal is quick and agile, and wheeling flocks can even resemble waders.

This is a tiny species, our smallest dabbling duck by far, and is often identifiable by size alone, particularly when associating with other duck species. Its proportions are compact, with a short body, small, rounded head and a relatively small bill. The overall impression is one of 'cuteness'.

Its plumage is fairly drab, with dark brown feather centres and paler fringes. Look, however, for the distinctive face pattern which comprises a dark eyestripe and crown and pale supercilium, and note also the conspicuous pale stripes adjacent to the tail sides. The speculum is dark green with a white and chestnut upper border and a white rear edge. The bill is dark with some orange in the base.

### Mallard

In many places this is the 'default duck' although in winter it is not as numerous overall as Eurasian Teal or Eurasian Wigeon. Females are large and 'heavy', particularly long and rather stocky in the body, with a somewhat inelegant structure – very much the traditional 'farmyard duck'.

The plumage is somewhat unremarkable, comprising dark brown feather centres and pale fringes, but note the dark eyestripe, dark crown and pale supercilium. The dark blue speculum is broadly bordered both above and below by white. The bill is dull greyish with variable amounts of orange present.

### Gadwall

This species can look somewhat anonymous and can therefore cause particular identification problems. Its size and structure are closest to Mallard and (although it is actually in a different genus) it is most likely to be overlooked as that species. It is, however, significantly smaller, and more elegantly proportioned.

The female's plumage is also a close match to that of Mallard although the face and throat are somewhat paler. The key feature in the wing is a rectangular white area on the secondaries, although this may be quite restricted on juvenile birds. The bill is grey with a prominent and quite distinctive orange stripe along the cutting edges.

### Eurasian Wigeon

This species, like Northern Pintail, is very much a winter bird, at which time it can be found in large, noisy flocks, both on large bodies of water and also grazing on adjacent grassland.

It is a medium-sized duck with a quite distinctive structure, mainly a function of its rather fat-looking, rounded head, with a conspicuously steep forehead, a short neck and a short bill.

The plumage is quite striking too, not the drab brown of the other dabbling ducks but showing rich chestnut hues, particularly in the flanks. Out of the water and in flight, there is a very prominent and well-defined white belly. The speculum is dark, narrowly bordered white, and the bill is blue-grey with a dark tip.

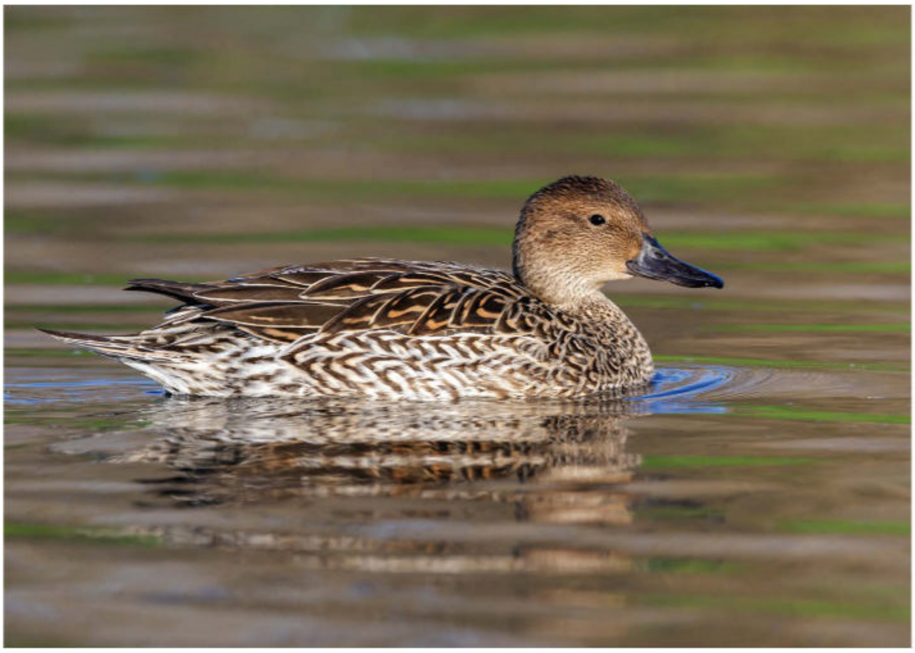
### Northern Shoveler

This species is widespread but is rarely seen in large flocks. Typically it is encountered in ones or twos, often mixed in with other wildfowl.

This is a sizeable and 'heavy' dabbling duck, with a large head, short neck and long, broad body. It is perhaps the most structurally distinctive of all the dabbling ducks. The bill is most striking – long and shovel-like – although it is often held below the water and patience may be required for its true size to be revealed. In the meantime the 'front-heavy' swimming posture provides another clue to its identity.

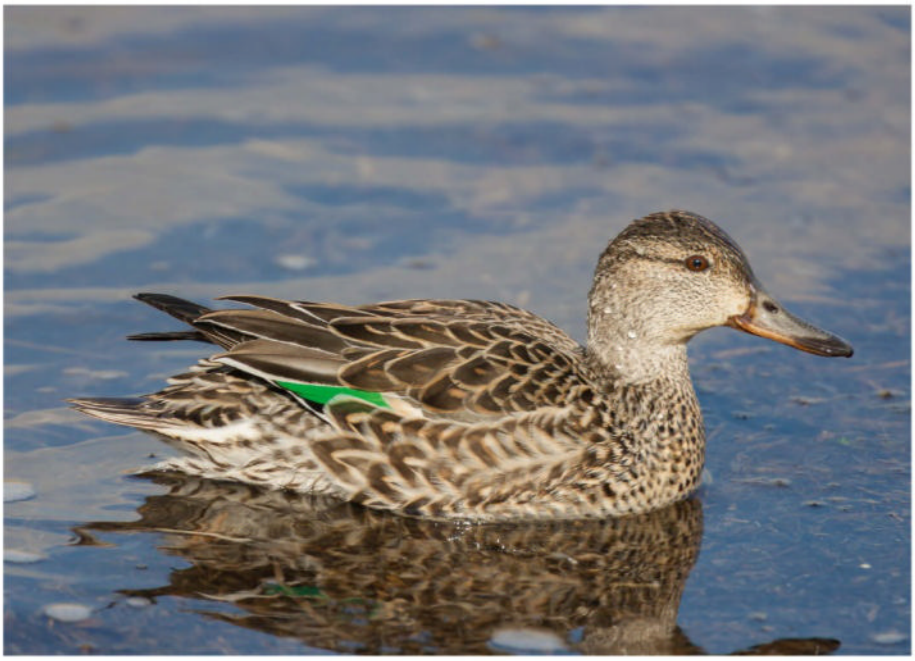
The plumage is very much in the 'drab and brown' mould, but look for a dull green speculum with a white bar at the leading edge but no broad white trailing edge', and look also for a distinctive contrasting pale grey forewing. The bill is dark with orange sides.

TWO: Northern Pintail (Santa Clara, California, 18 December 2012). This female Northern Pintail looks long bodied, slim and elegant, with a rather long and slender grey bill. Its plumage is equally striking, with a very bland, plain-looking face in which the eye is the only really noticeable feature, and an overall pale fawn appearance with strong brown vermiculations along the flanks.



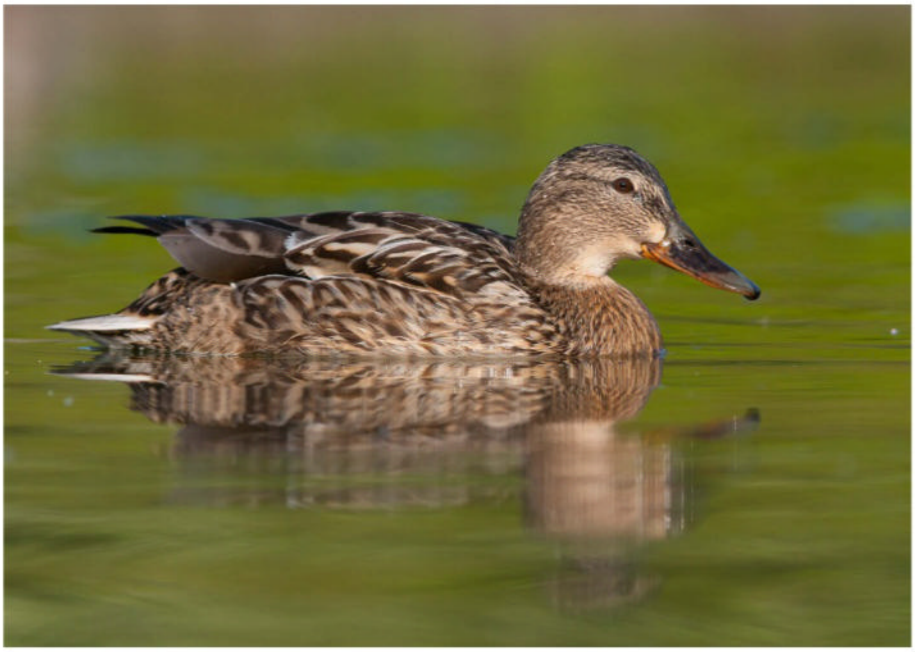
BRIAN E SMALL (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

THREE: Eurasian Teal (Chew Valley Lake, Somerset, 6 March 2005). This female Eurasian Teal looks typically small, short bodied and compact. There is a reasonably well-developed face pattern with a dark eyestripe, pale supercilium and plain-looking cheeks. Note also two key plumage features: a pale line at the side of the tail and a bright, shiny green speculum peeping out from the wing feathers.

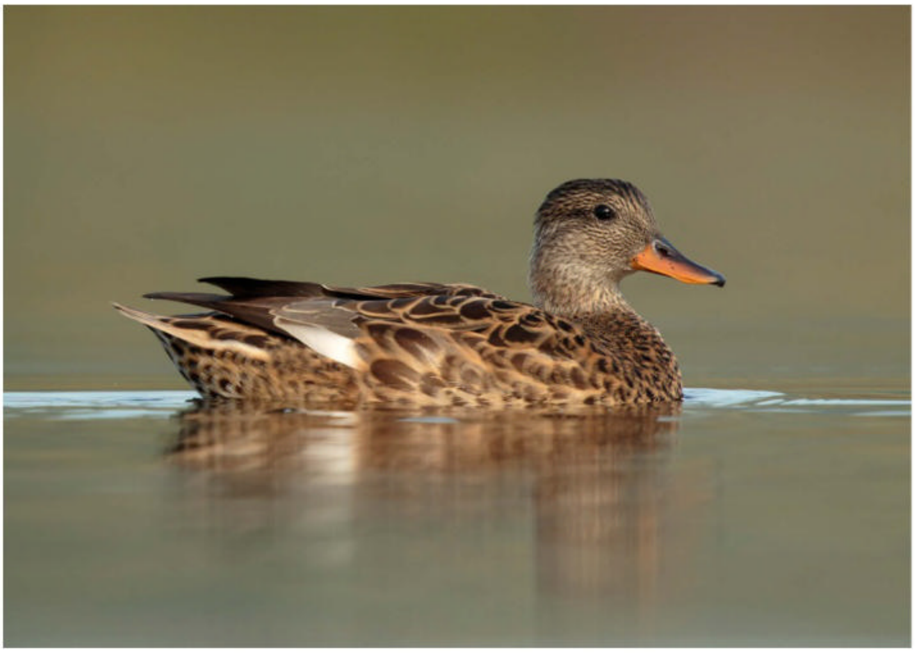


OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

FOUR: Mallard (site unknown, Germany, 23 April 2009). Female Mallards look a little ‘anonymous’, with a rather chunky ‘farmyard duck’ structure which lacks obvious elegance. The body is long and heavy, with the bill a little on the heavy side also. The characteristic blue speculum is not visible here, so pay attention to the weakly marked face pattern which includes a very faint ‘loral spot’.

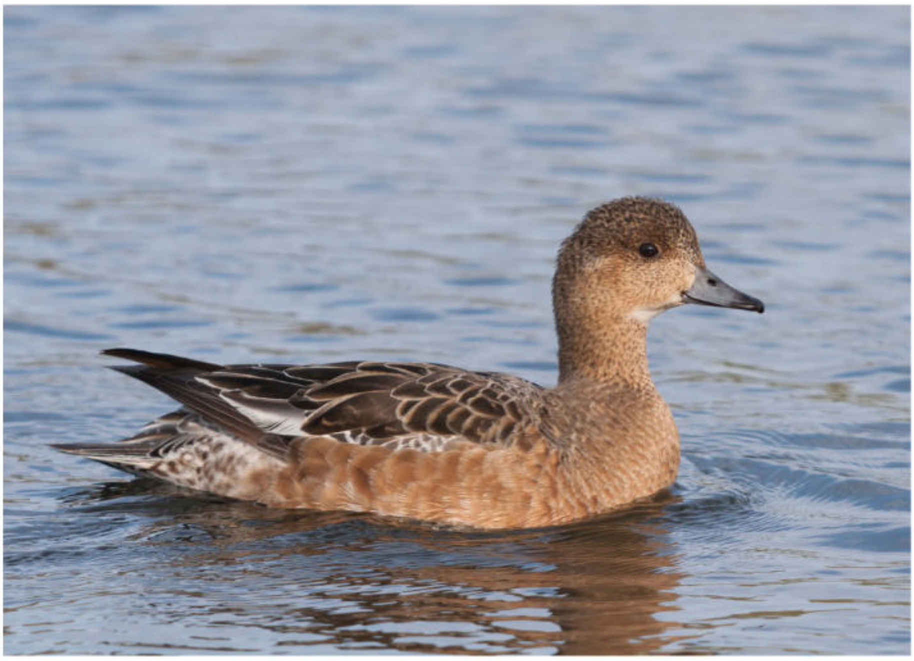


RALPH MARTIN (WWW.AGAMI.NL)



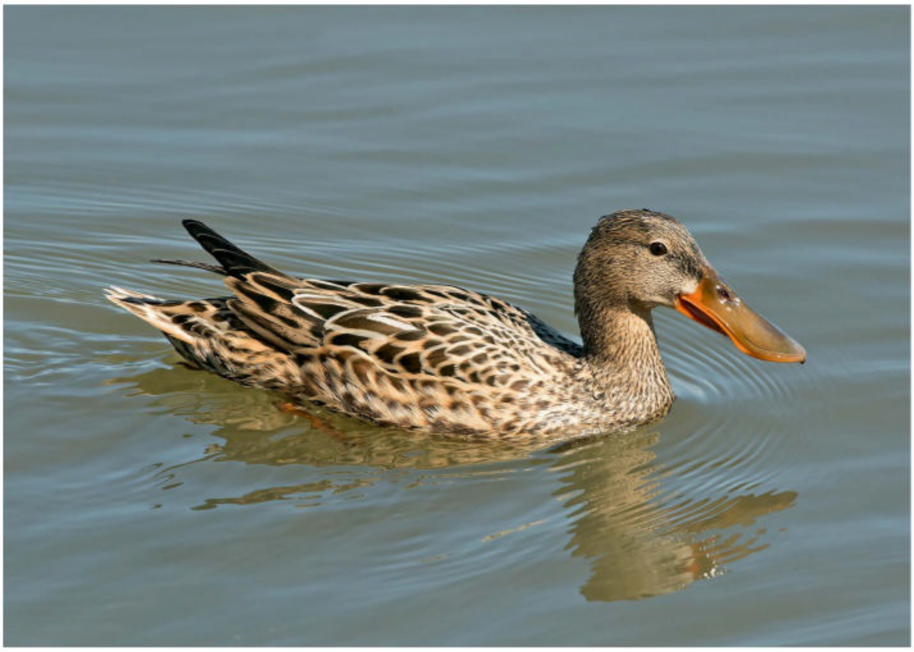
WALTER SOESTBERGEN (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

FIVE: Gadwall (site unknown, The Netherlands, 3 October 2015). Female Gadwall are a little like Mallards, but are smaller and daintier and often look a little paler and greyer, especially on the face and neck. The real 'giveaway' here is the bright white secondary patch; this is not always visible but when it is revealed it is the key identification feature of this species.



RALPH MARTIN (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

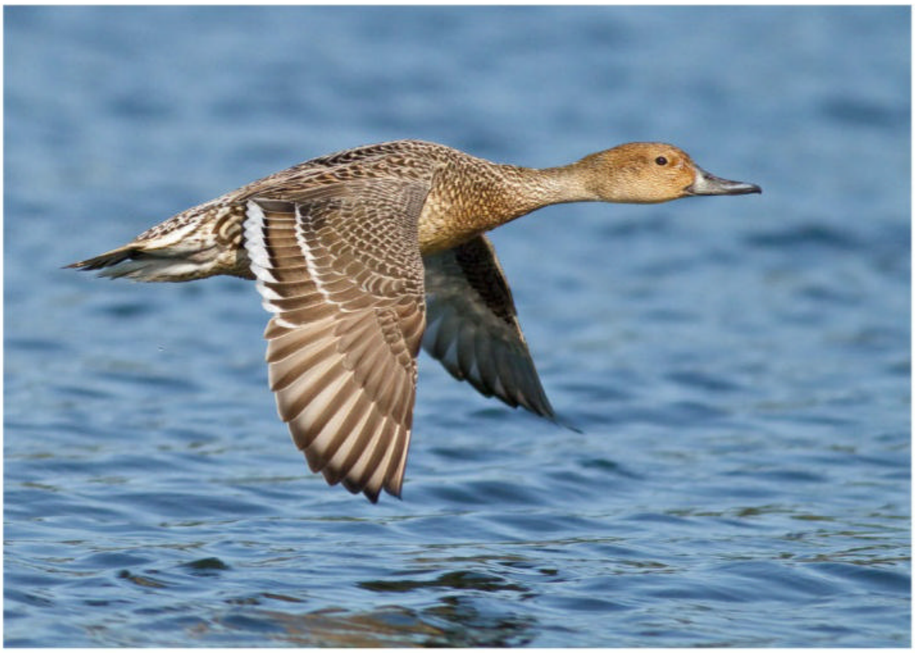
SIX: Eurasian Wigeon (site unknown, Iceland, 7 July 2007). Eurasian Wigeon are rather compact and short-necked ducks. This bird is stretching up its neck but it still doesn't look long necked. The grey bill is also rather short and petite. Note the plain-looking face of this female and in particular the overall rich brown and chestnut plumage hues (especially along the flanks) which are diagnostic of this species.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

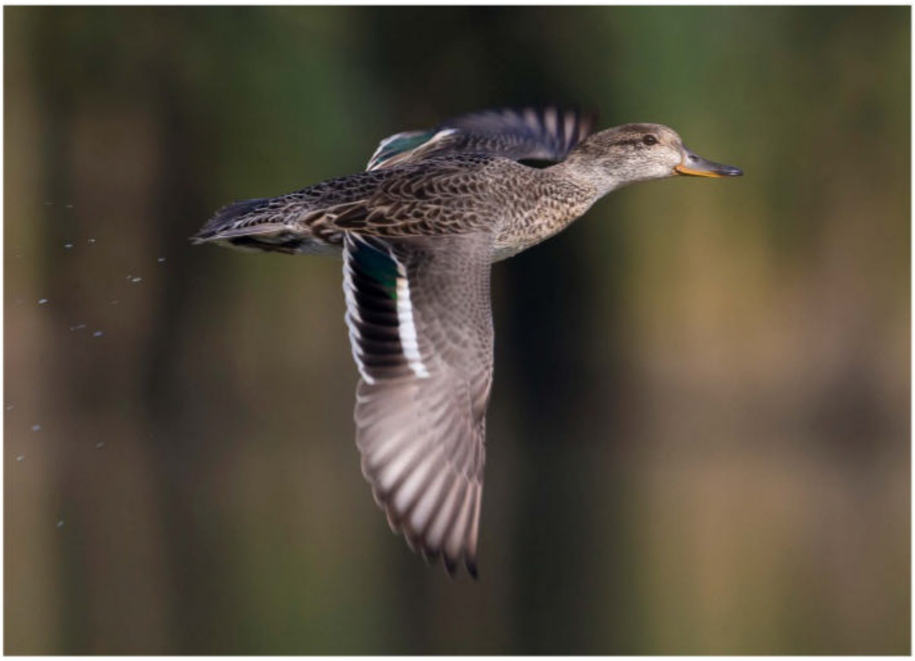
SEVEN: Northern Shoveler (Seaforth, Lancashire, 5 May 2018). The plumage of female Northern Shoveler is a little Mallard-like – although rather plainer faced – but note the obviously different and unique structure comprising a 'low in the water' front end, a strongly rounded head and the strikingly long and broad spatulate bill.

EIGHT: Northern Pintail (Victoria, British Colombia, Canada, 6 March 2009). Flying Northern Pintail look long bodied, long necked, slim and elegant, perhaps a little goose-like. The overall appearance of females is one of pale uniformity, an impression heightened by the relatively dull speculum bordered by white above and below.



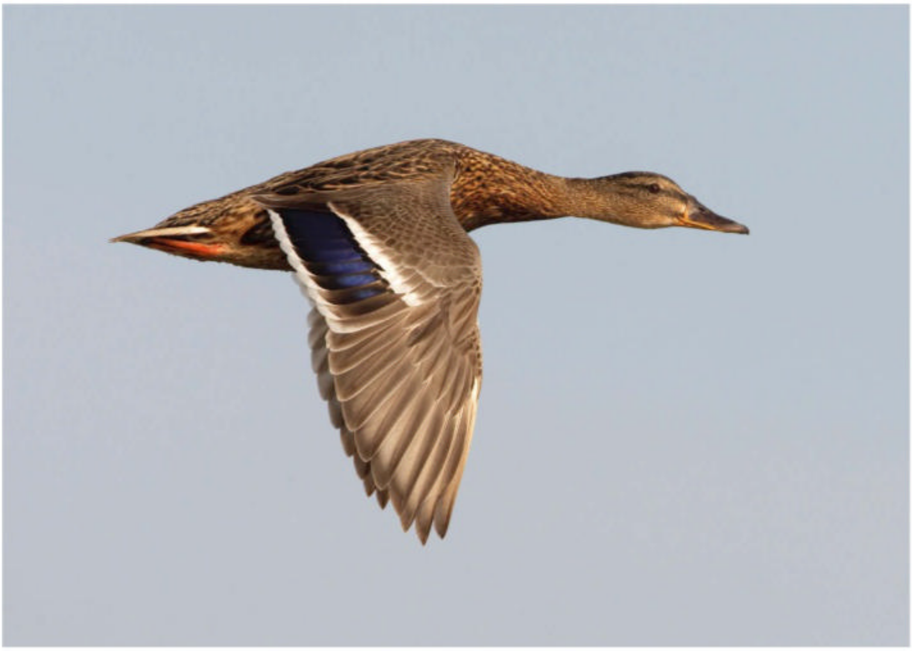
GLENN BARTLEY (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

NINE: Eurasian Teal (Florence, Italy, 30 October 2014). Eurasian Teal look small, quick and agile in the air, almost like waders. Note on this female the rather plain-looking upperwing combined with a dark green speculum (which will appear brighter in different light), which is bordered by white above and below.

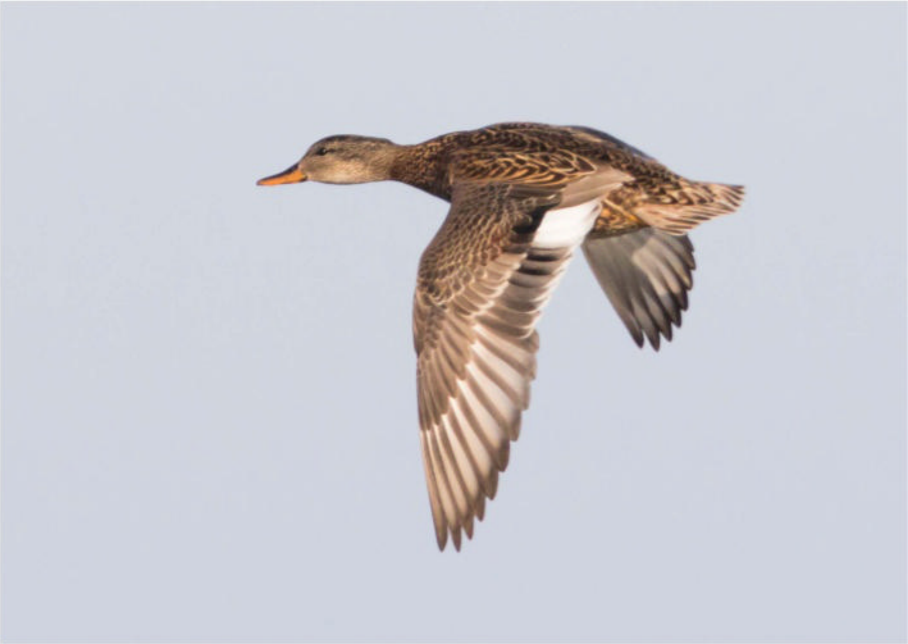


DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

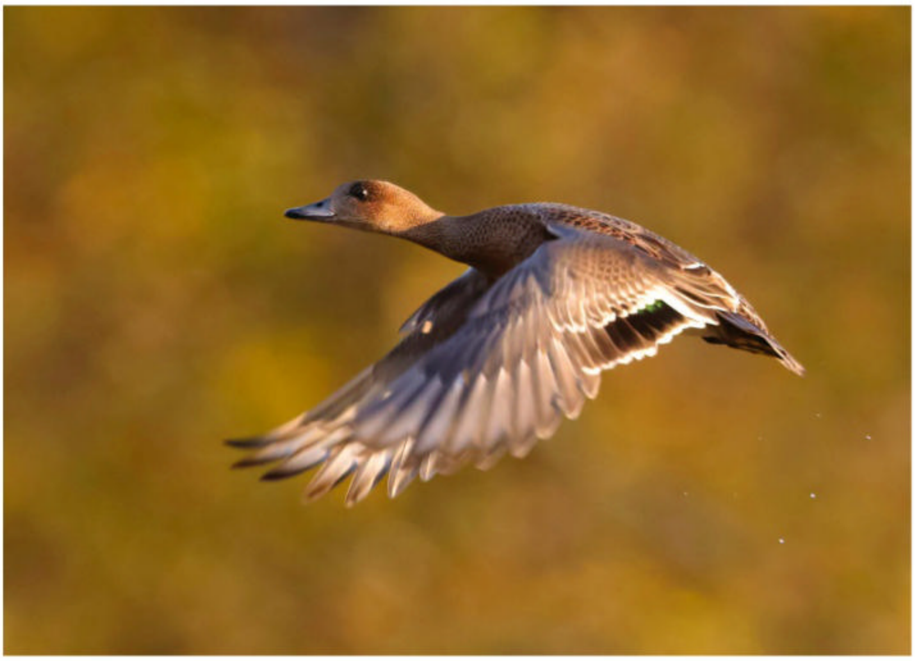
TEN: Mallard (Terschelling, The Netherlands, 10 July 2008). The somewhat ungainly structure of a Mallard is evident in flight also, the species looking both large and heavy. On this type of flight view of a female, note also that the speculum is glossy blue, sandwiched between bands of white.



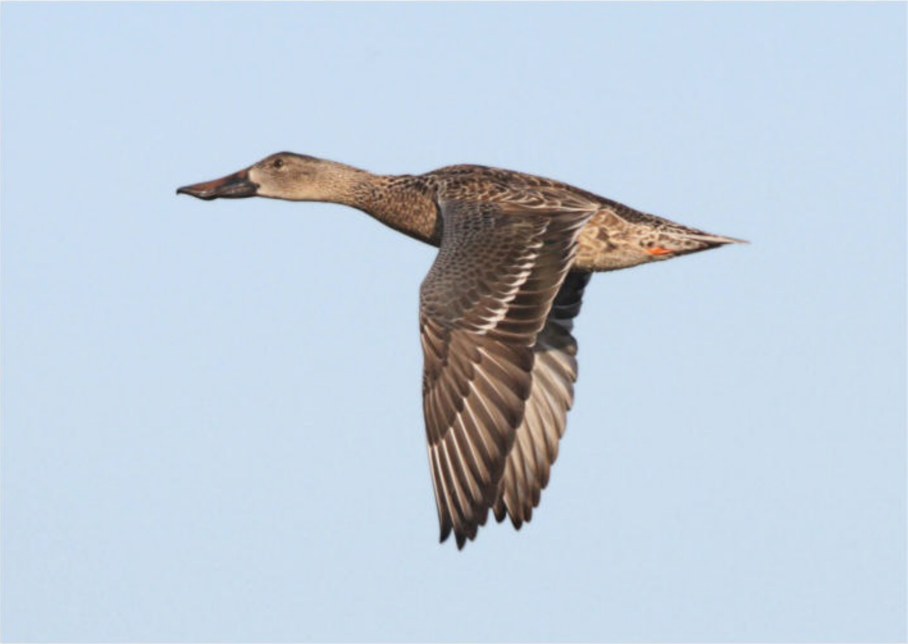
ARIE OUWERKERK (WWW.AGAMI.NL)


RALPH MARTIN (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

ELEVEN: Gadwall (Den Oever, The Netherlands, 16 March 2015). Flying Gadwall look like a small and delicate version of Mallard, but the most obvious feature is always the prominent white patch on the secondaries. The extent of this varies according to the bird's sex and age but it is always present and a sure clue to its identity.


TOMI MUUKKONEN (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

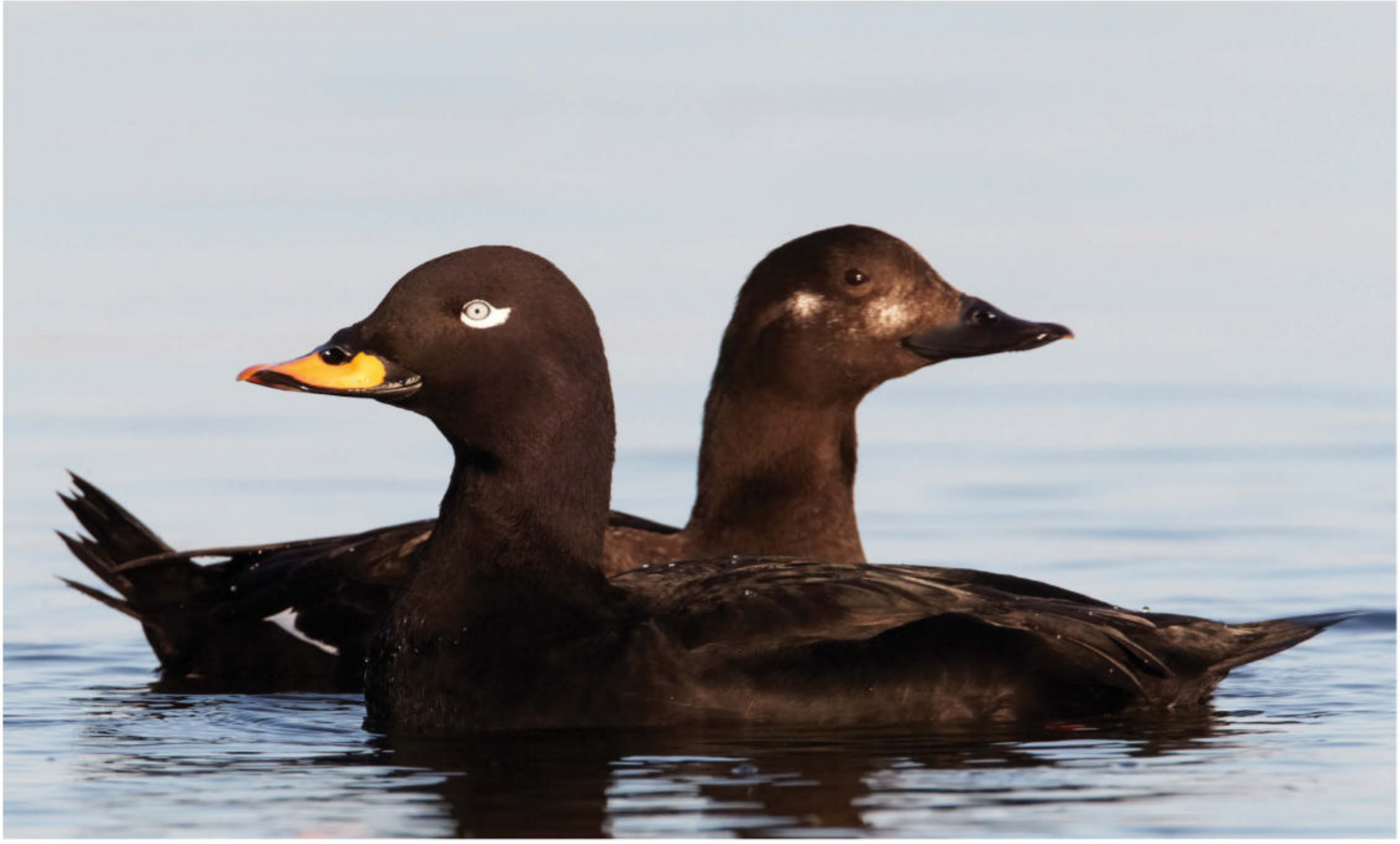
TWELVE: Eurasian Wigeon (Kirkkonummi, Finland, 10 May 2010). The upperwing of female Eurasian Wigeon in flight is a rather uniform grey with a white-bordered dark speculum. However, the most eye-catching plumage feature in flight (though sadly not captured here) is the well-defined white belly patch. As for structure, Eurasian Wigeon always looks rather compact and short necked in the air.


MIKE DANZENBAKER (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

THIRTEEN: Northern Shoveler (California, United States, 19 January 2008). The wing pattern of this female Northern Shoveler is rather plain, with a uniform grey-brown forewing – in contrast to the pale blue of the males – and a dull speculum very narrowly bordered with white. However, it is always the bill which catches the attention, looking almost grotesquely long and broad and giving the bird a strangely 'front-heavy' appearance.

# Velvet, White-winged and Stejneger's Scoters

Words by Martin Garner



MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

ONE: Male (front) and female (back) Velvet Scoter (Utö, Finland, 21 May 2010). A beautiful close-up of a pair of Velvet Scoters. A view like this would be exceptional in Britain or Ireland, as here Velvet Scoters prefer to remain a little more distant offshore than they do in northern Europe, where they breed. Note the extensive clean yellow colour on the bill of the male and the characteristic slightly concave forehead and bill profile, with just a slight swelling above the nostrils. A sliver of the diagnostic white wing-patch is visible on the female but in the male it is concealed by the overlaying rear flank feathers. The male's white eye-patch does not extend very far behind the eye.

There was a time when any scoter with a white wing-bar was simply a 'Velvet'. Not any more, as what was once regarded as a single Holarctic species has been divided in two: North American birds have been split as White-winged Scoter, with an equally distinctive Asian subspecies, Stejneger's Scoter, which itself may be separated at species level. Both White-winged and Stejneger's Scoters have now been found among scoter flocks in British and Irish waters, highlighting the rewards for the vigilant observer. Main text by Martin Garner.

# Basic Principles

"Look at the shape on that. It's nothing like the same!" I was talking to Anthony McGeehan and David Quinn and responding to views of a female White-winged Scoter off Vancouver Island, Canada. It was (perhaps to some) a boring brown duck surrounded by Pacific Rim wonders such as Ancient Murrelet, Harlequin Duck, Rhinoceros Auklet and Pacific Diver.

It was late November 1997 and I had spent some time carefully watching a female-type Velvet Scoter in Belfast Lough just the week before. Noting all its characteristics and behaviours, I was watching it as if I were seeing the species for the first time.

I like the way small children learn their colours: one at a time. The first colour might be blue. They will point to everything that is blue after that. If a parent then points to something red and asked what colour it is. The child will reply: "It's not blue."

The female Velvet Scoter in Belfast Lough was my 'blue'. On seeing the female White-winged Scoter, considered to be the same species, my response was straightforward: It's not 'blue'! This simple, even child-like way of birding has served me pretty well for 40 years.

So began an exploration into all ages and sexes of the three scoters with white feathering on the inner wing. Velvet Scoter *Melanitta fusca* of Northern Europe and Asia, 'American' White-winged Scoter *M deglandi* of North America and Stejneger's Scoter *M (deglandi) stejnegeri* of East Asia. When I first started exploring the subject, all three were viewed as forms of the same species. However, they are identifiable at all ages – distinctly different in fact – and one of these days are going to be afforded full specific status, just as they deserve.

### Structure, plumage and bill colour

There are three essential elements to the identification of these three forms. Structure of the skull and bill, body plumage in adult males and bill colour in immature and adult males. The head and bill structure of each is distinctive in all ages and sexes.

A good starting point is to become familiar with the structure and shape of, for example, the next Velvet Scoter you encounter. There are subtle differences in head and bill shapes of Velvet Scoters in females, young brown males and more obviously adult male plumages. Once fully appreciated, the structures of the other two species become more apparent.

These differences can be simply characterised as follows:

- Velvet Scoter has a squarish head but with a concave scooped bill shape.
- American White-winged Scoter has a three-tiered/two-stepped profile for the bill and head.
- Stejneger's Scoter has a flat-topped head with a long 'Roman nose' recalling a Common Eider.

Plumage differences are subtle, and while they have been emphasised in the past (brown flanks on American White-winged males and black flanks on male Stejneger's Scoter), they can be difficult to see, and the head structure and bill colour of males is usually enough for a clear identification.

Often visible at long range, the males' bill colours can lead to a very quick identification. Male Velvet Scoters have a long strip of orange-yellow scooping under the nostrils. American White-winged has a more restricted pinkish-red patch with a dab of yellow just underneath a more prominent nostril. The very knobbly billed adult male Stejneger's has pinky-red similar to its American counterpart, but most importantly, a diagnostic yellow lick running along the edge of the upper mandible.

The white tick mark with a 'tail' behind the eye is almost always present on American White-winged and Stejneger's, versus the more restricted small white scoop under the eye on male Velvet.

The usefulness of these characters was born out when I was exploring the subject in the dial-up days of the internet some 10 years ago. I made a couple of 'keyboard warrior' discoveries. North America's first Stejneger's Scoter (Cape Nome, Alaska, May 2001) was sitting on Brad Bergstrom's website and the second photographed Stejneger's Scoter for the Western Palearctic was on an Icelandic website.

The latter bird was present in Iceland in April and May 2003. With several previous records of American White-winged Scoter there, it was assumed to be the North American form. However, the characteristic head shape and little yellow lick on the bill side even on small images showed it to be the Asian vagrant.

Since then, these characters have been written up, tested and superbly illustrated, first by Ian Lewington and subsequently by Killian Mullarney in the second edition of the *Collins Bird Guide*. This has led to the discovery of the two rare species in Europe.

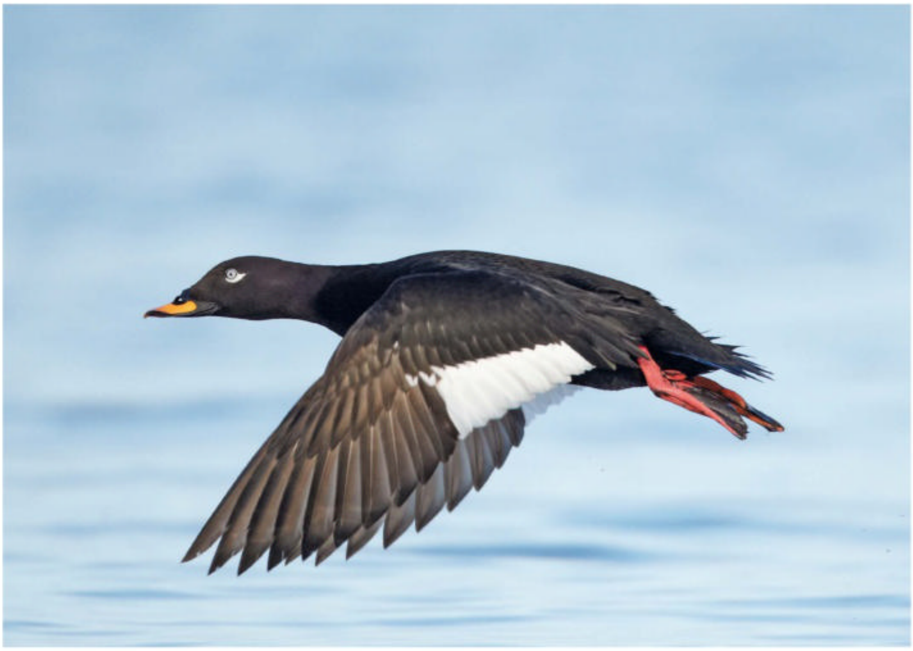
In the last few years, Stejneger's Scoter arrived in two consecutive years in Arctic Norway in brown female-type plumage (a young male). An adult male Stejneger's was found off south-west Ireland and Britain's first American White-winged Scoter, a first-summer male, was picked out in north-east Scotland. The discovery and identification of the rarer species in immature plumages in the Western Palearctic fully demonstrates the distinctive structure and plumage of all three forms.

So we now know that all three birds can occur in British and Irish waters, and the regular checking of scoter flocks provides the best opportunities for finding them. While winter is a traditional time to focus on seaduck, May and June have had the most occurrences, found in traditional summer moult flocks of Common Scoter. In the meantime, practise the shapes and colours on any of the scoters-with-white-wings that you see. Then keep checking. Look for the one that's not blue!

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

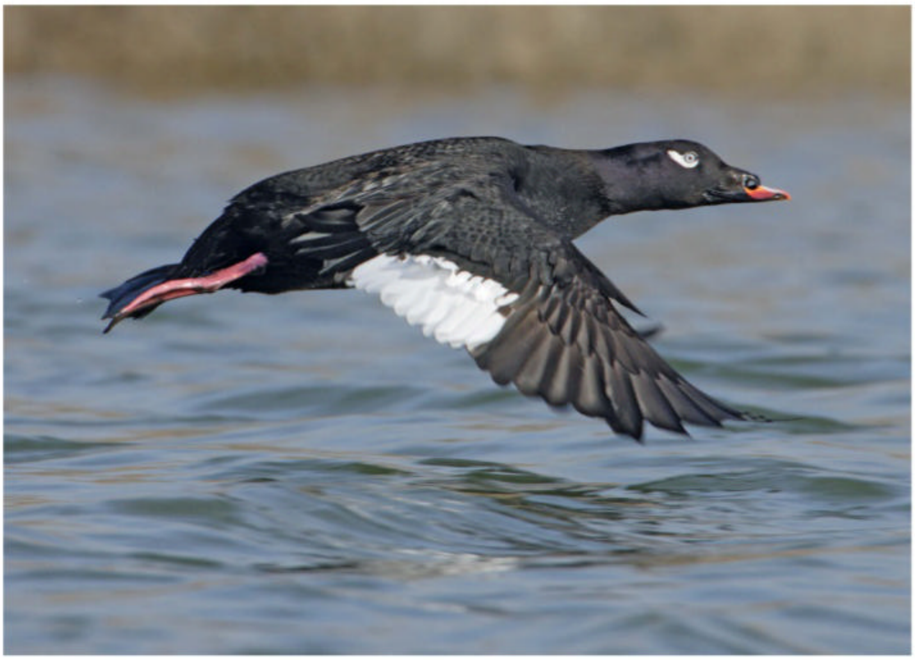
Special thanks to Killian Mullarney and Ian Lewington for assistance in various ways at short notice.

TWO: Male Velvet Scoter (Utö, Finland, 25 May 2010). The bright pink legs are a feature of adult males in all three forms of Velvet/White-winged Scoter, but the extensive yellow colour on the bill is seen only in European birds.



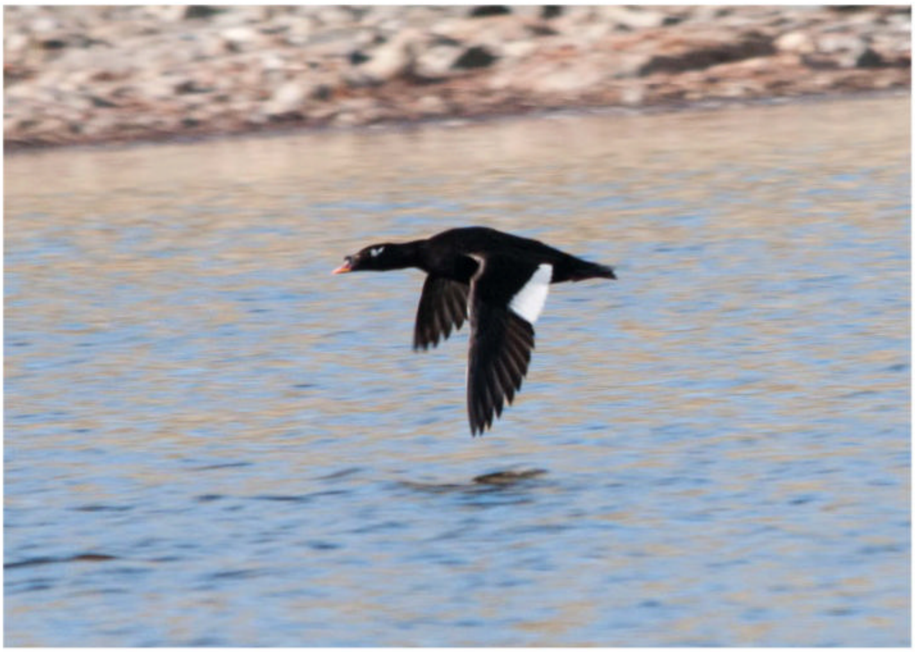
MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

THREE: Male American White-winged Scoter (Washington, USA, 12 February 2006). The predominant colour on the bill is raspberry-pink, shading to yellowish just below the nostril. This diagnostic feature can often be determined at long range, sometimes even in flying birds.

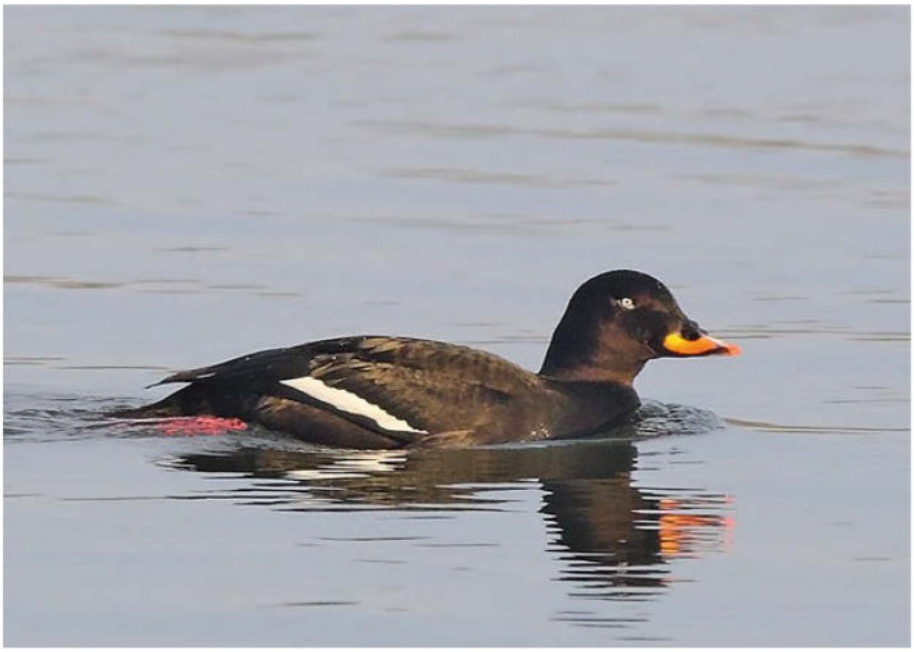


MIKE DANZENBAKER (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

FOUR: Male Stejneger's Scoter (Chuya Steppe, Republic of Altai, Russia, 6 May 2011). Bill colour detail that is difficult to register on a bird in flight can often be captured in photographs. Note the 'long-faced' look created by the combination of very prominent knobbly bill and the streak of white extending well behind the eye.

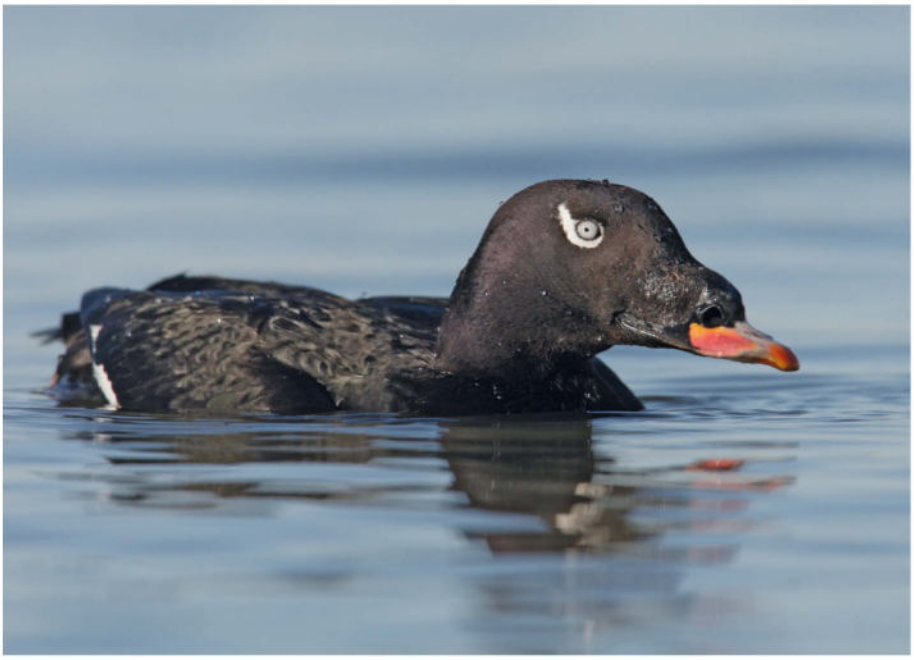


SERGEY YELISEEV



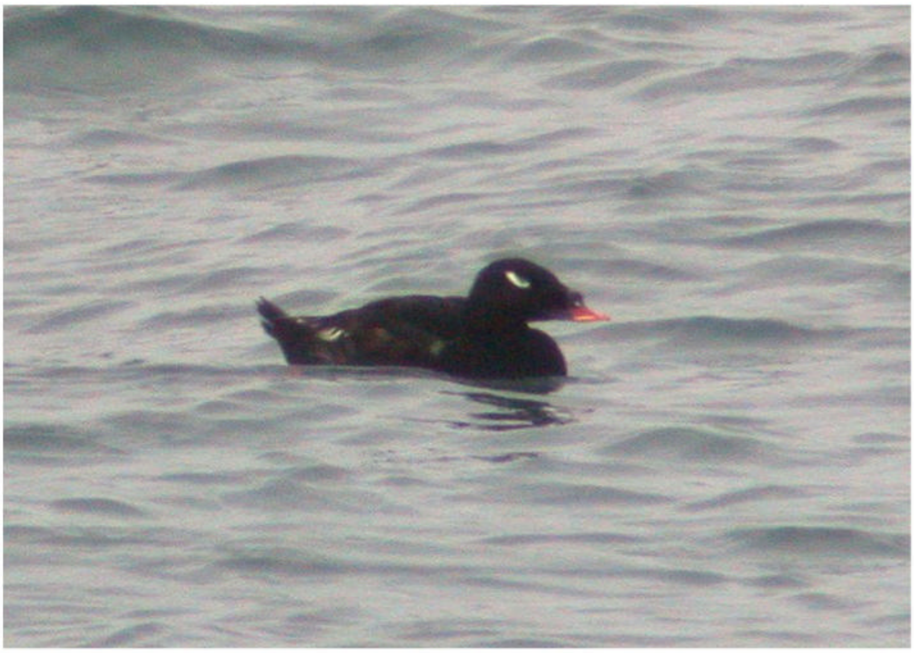
TONY DAVISON

FIVE: Male Velvet Scoter (Eyebrook Reservoir, Leicestershire, 15 December 2013). The colour on the bill can appear more orange-yellow at times, with a tinge of pink on the broad nail. Importantly, only in Velvet does the colour extend well to the rear of the nostrils.



MIKE DANZENBAKER (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

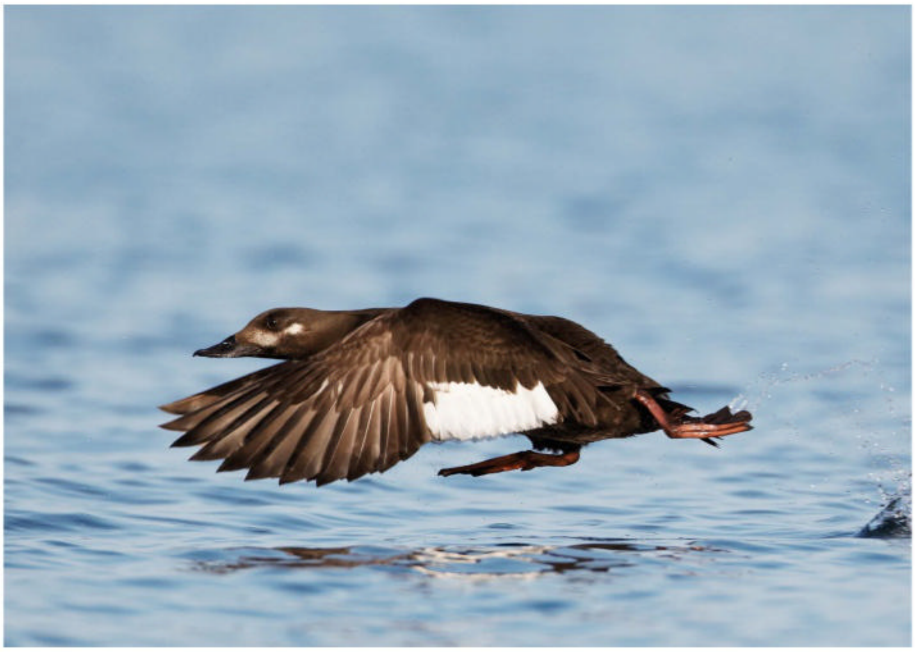
SIX: Male American White-winged Scoter (California, USA, 9 February 2008). The prominent bump above the nostril creates a very different profile from Velvet Scoter. Note the long, upswept white eye-patch and that the rearmost extent of colour on the bill is directly below the nostril.



NIAL MOORES

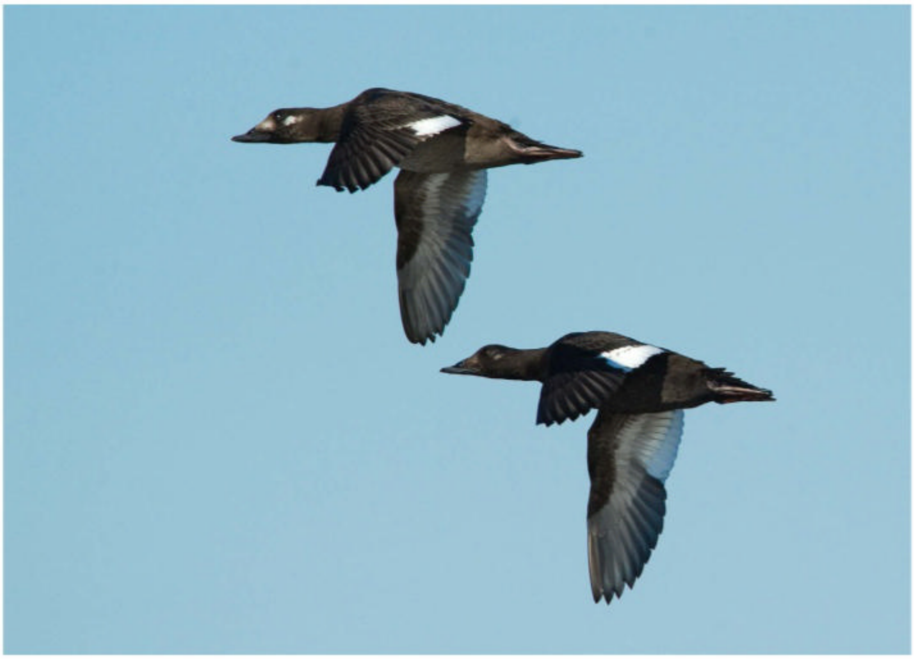
SEVEN: Male Stejneger's Scoter (Baekryeong, South Korea, 24 November 2013). Similar to American White-winged, Stejneger's has an even more Common Eider-like profile – with little or no indent between forehead and bill – and a diagnostic stripe of yellow on the lower edge of the bill.

EIGHT: Female Velvet Scoter (Utö, Finland, 25 May 2010). The conspicuous white wing-panel is similar in all three species and is made up of broad white tips to the greater coverts as well as the entire length of the secondary feathers. You may need to look at this perfect shot with half-closed eyes to get the impression of Velvet Scoter's very subtly concave profile of the forehead and bill, despite the slightly convex swelling over the nostril.



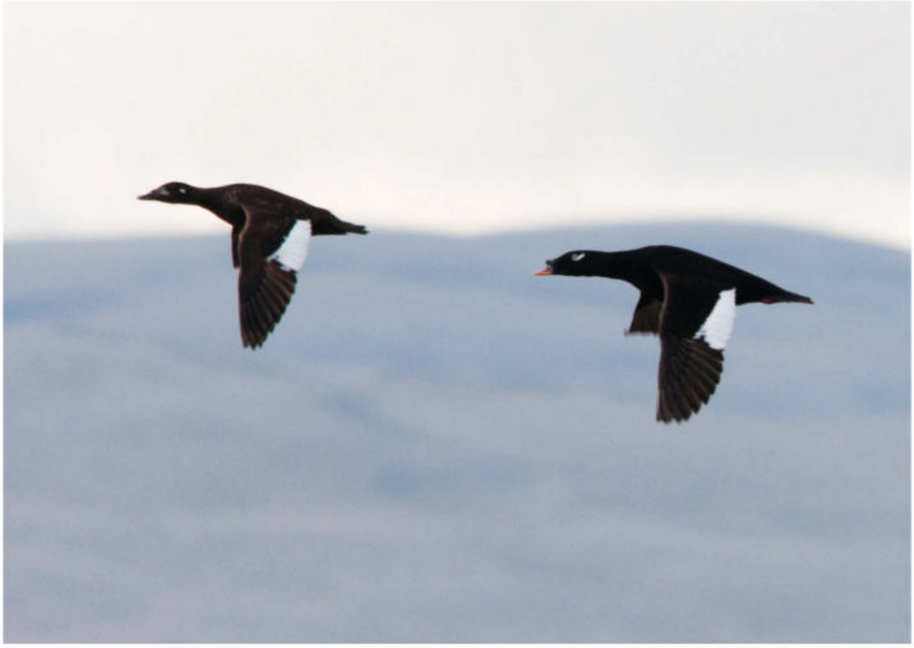
MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

NINE: Juvenile (top) and probable adult female (bottom) American White-winged Scoter (Ontario, Canada, 23 November 2011). Not the ideal view for assessing subtle forehead and bill profiles, but other details in the photo are interesting; the finely mottled underparts of the upper bird, apparently becoming lighter towards the chest, suggest it is a juvenile and the narrow pale tips to the greater coverts support this. The lower bird's darker head and underbody and broader white tips to the greater coverts indicate an adult, in which case obviously a female.

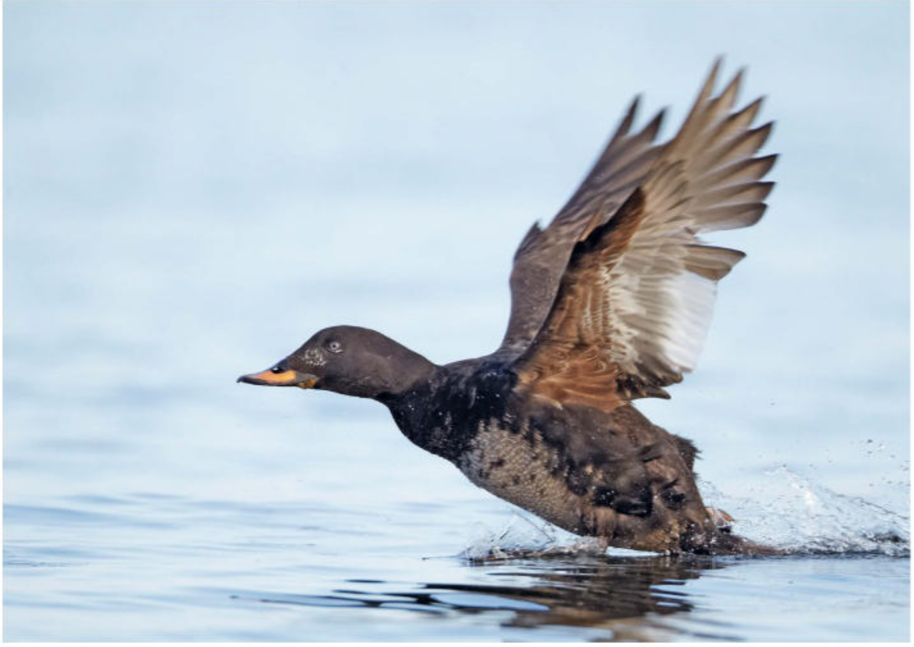


EARL REININK

TEN: Male (left) and female (right) Stejneger's Scoter (Chuya Steppe, Republic of Altai, Russia, 6 May 2011). Even in this heavily cropped image, all of the key identification features of Stejneger's can be readily determined – at least in the male! The long, upswept white streak behind the eye, the very prominent knob on the bill with forward-projecting 'overhang' and the yellowish stripe along the edge of the bill. If she were on her own, however, the female would be a real challenge on this view.

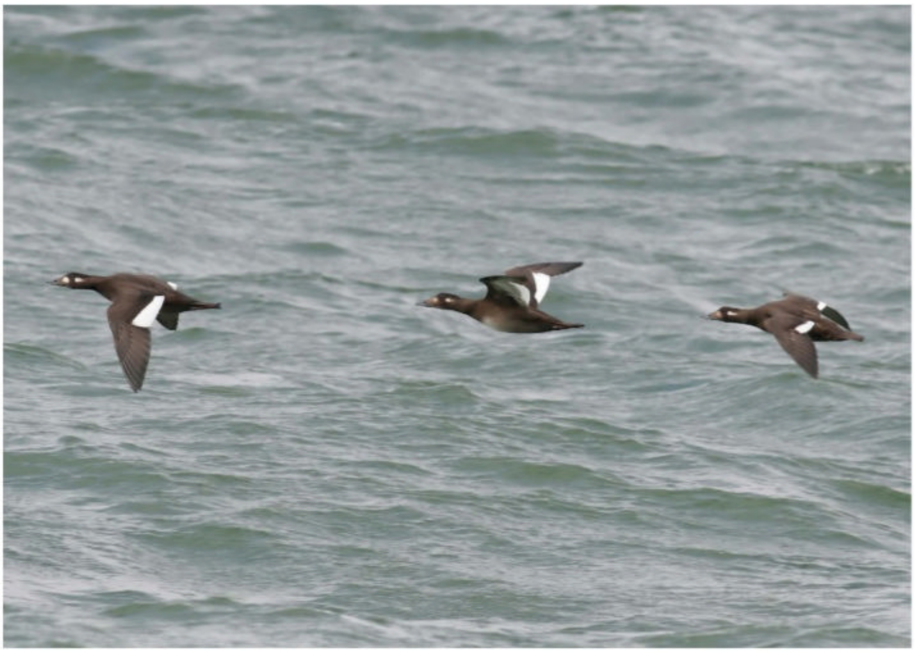


SERGEY YELISEEV



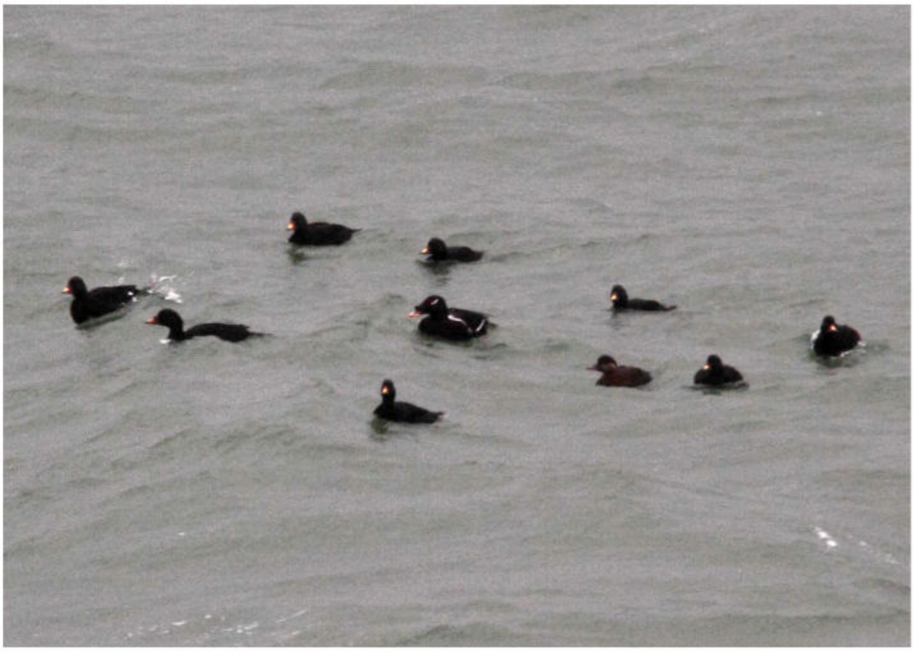
MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

ELEVEN: Second-calendar-year male Velvet Scoter (Utö, Finland, 25 May 2010). In ducks, the juvenile feathers below the 'waterline' are often among the last to be moulted and over time become much faded, sometimes even whitish in first-summer scoters. This bird has not yet acquired the slightly swollen bill-base of an adult male, but the yellow bill-sides are similar to an adult, just a shade duller. The white eye-patch has yet to develop.



JULIAN HOUGH

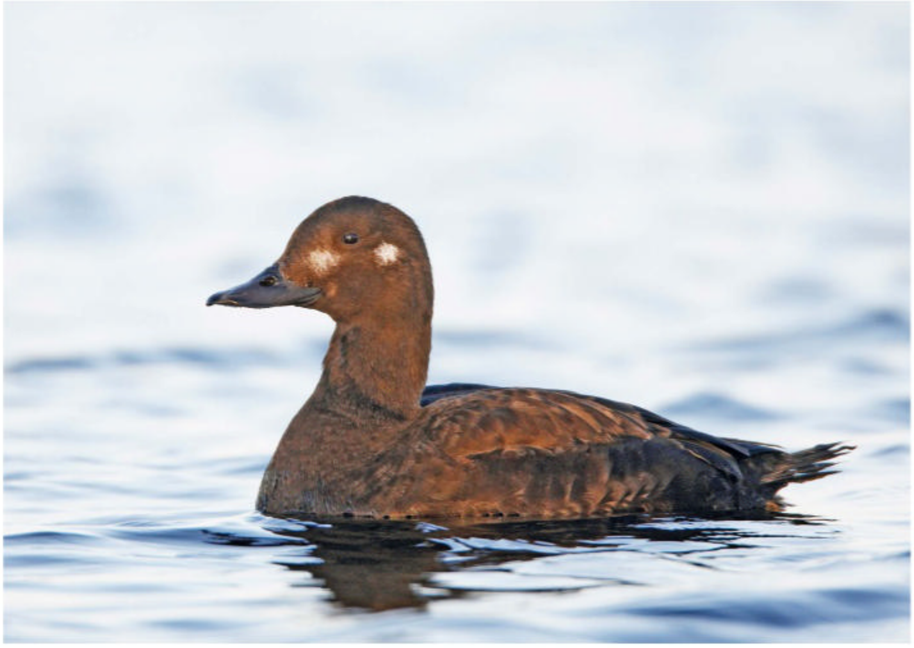
TWELVE: Juvenile American White-winged Scoter (Massachussets, USA, 8 October 2006). The diffuse pale belly on the middle bird is indicative of a juvenile, as are the prominent, clear-cut light ear-covert spots and the subtle contrast between the darker cap and lighter hindneck in all three birds. The curiously Surf Scoter-like head markings combined with the lack of juvenile Velvet Scoter's slightly concave forehead and bill profile should raise alarm bells on this side of the Atlantic; let's hope they stop!



PAUL AND ANDREA KELLY (WWW.IRISHBIRDIMAGES.COM)

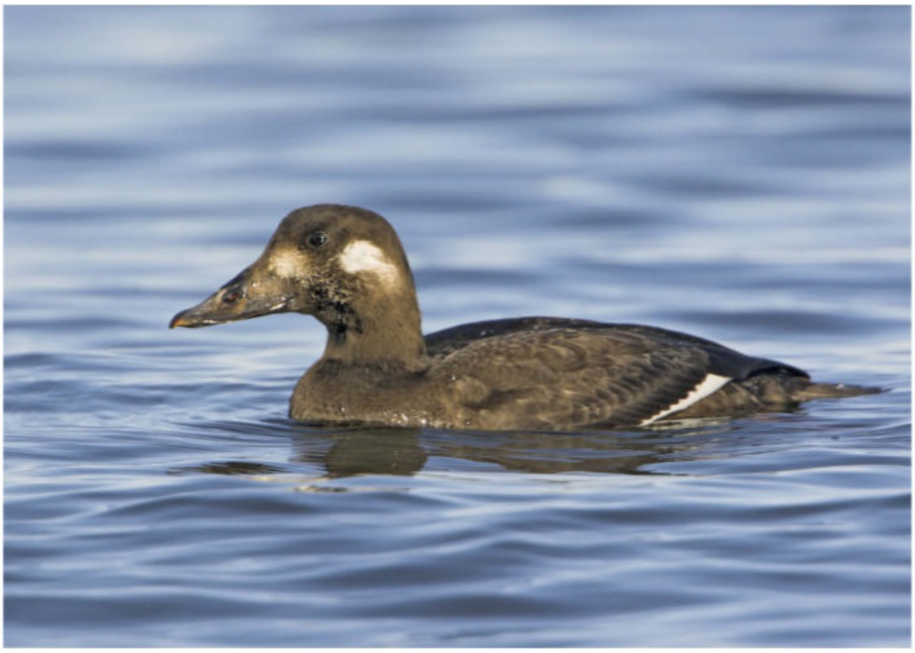
THIRTEEN: Adult male Stejneger's Scoter (centre, Rossbeigh, Co Kerry, 11 March 2011). Would you look at the head on that! This stonking adult male Stejneger's Scoter was a huge surprise in 2011, especially in view of the fact that Ireland still awaits its first record of Black Scoter, a species that has been recorded many times in north-west Europe (but interestingly, not yet in Iceland, either). For a lot of birders who travelled to see the bird, the views were much better than they'd ever managed to get of an adult male Velvet Scoter, so it made a big and lasting impression – a wonderful bird!

FOURTEEN: Female Velvet Scoter (Utö, Finland, 24 May 2009). The nicely proportioned head and bill and smoothly concave profile are typical of female Velvet Scoter. The extent and shape of the feathering on the sides of the bill provides a reliable means of distinguishing female Velvet from the two 'White-winged' taxa; in Velvet, the anterior edge of the feathering between the gape and the culmen runs in an almost straight diagonal, or a gently curved arc, passing a few millimetres behind the nostril.



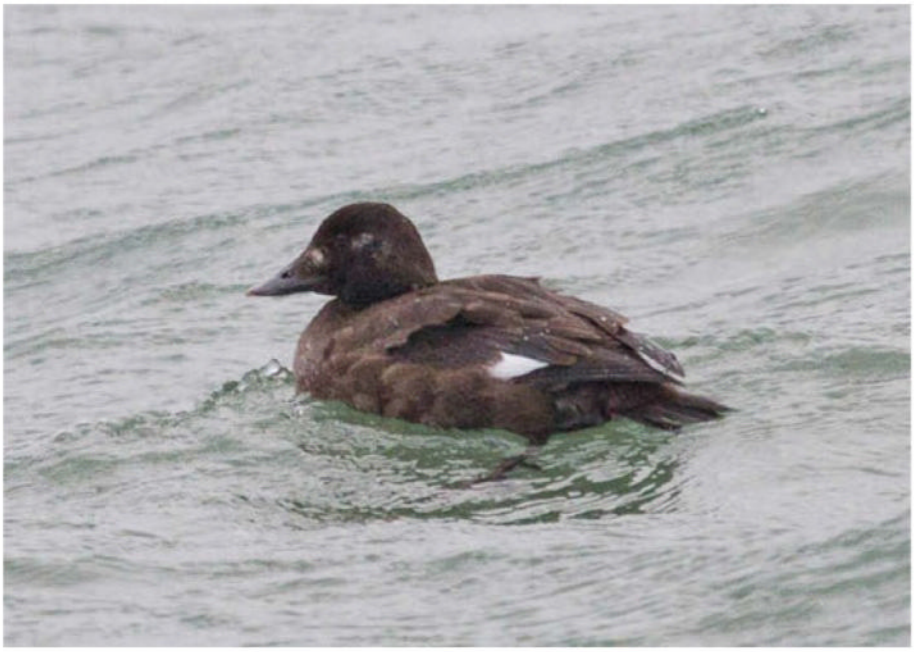
MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

FIFTEEN: Juvenile male American White-winged Scoter (Parksville, Canada, 2 November 2007). The Surf Scoter-like heavy-billed, long-faced appearance is characteristic of American White-winged Scoter. At close range it may be possible to determine that the feathering on the side of the bill in both White-winged and Stejenger's Scoters projects a little further forward than in Velvet (see photo 14), terminating in a broad point below and slightly behind the nostril. The lighter pinkish areas developing on the bill indicate this is a juvenile male.

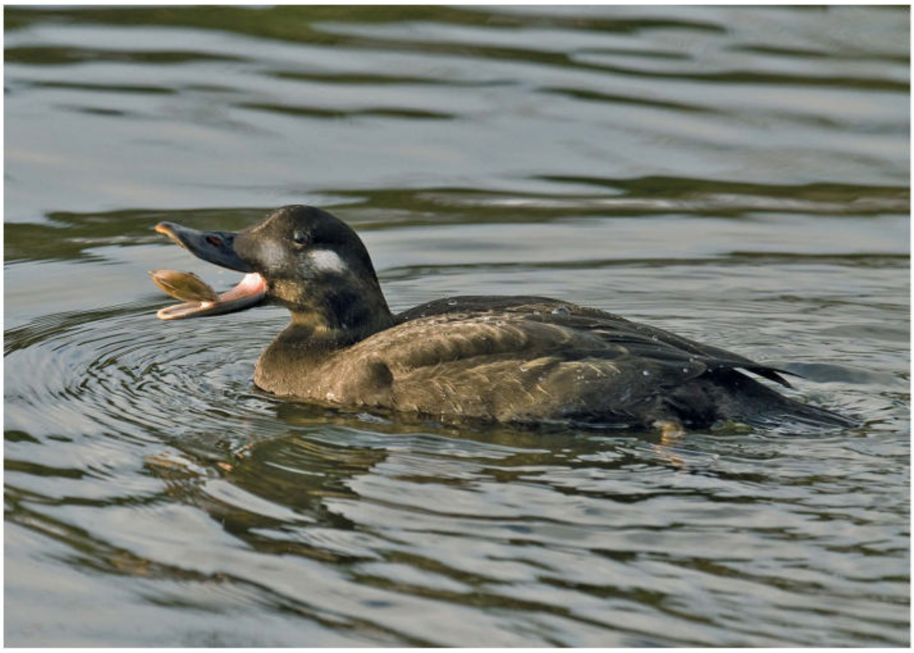


GLENN BARTLEY (WWW.BIRDIMAGENCY.COM)

SIXTEEN: Female Stejneger's Scoter (Hokkaido, Japan, 21 December 2012). Female Stejenger's Scoter has the most Common Eider-like profile of all, but curiously, it sometimes doesn't look as impressively big billed as American White-winged. This illusion is possibly due to the lack of definition between the forehead and the bill, with the feather-covered bulky bill-base being perceived as part of the head. The extensive feathering on the side of the bill can just be made out in this photo.

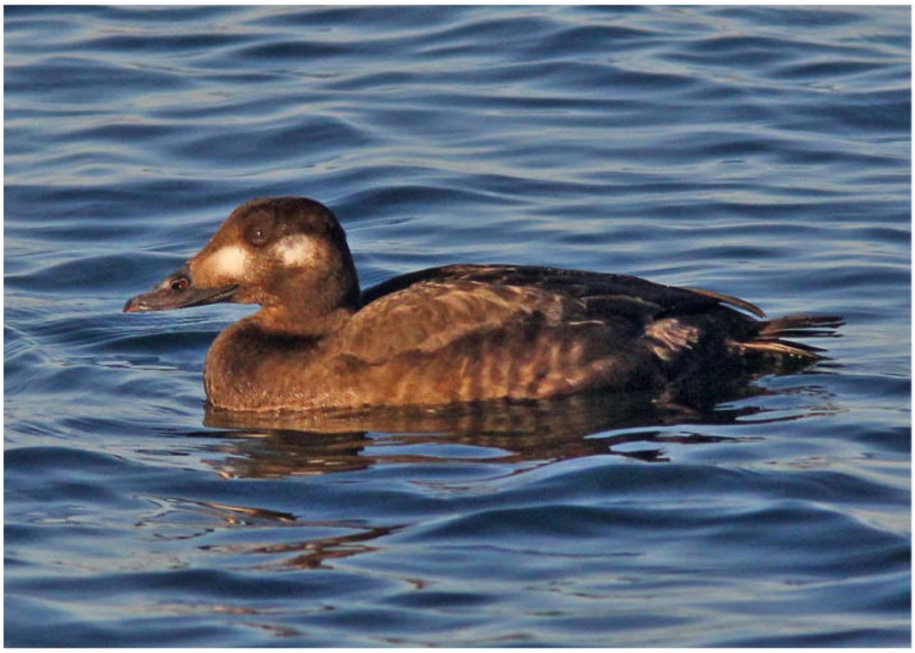


STUART PRICE



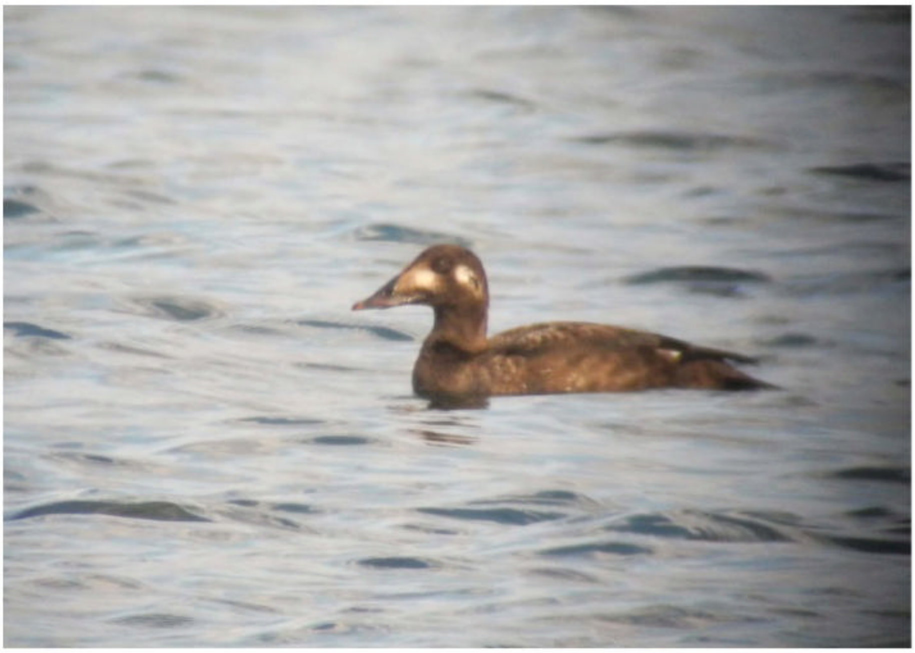
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

SEVENTEEN: Juvenile Velvet Scoter (Clitheroe, Lancashire, 26 December 2009). Occasionally, Velvet Scoters (usually juveniles) appear very close to shore on the sea or on lakes and are remarkably confiding. Such birds present an ideal opportunity to familiarise oneself with the more subtle identification criteria discussed in this article. Apart from being interesting in itself, the first-hand knowledge gained from such observation will prove invaluable if you ever come across a bird that looks like a White-winged or a Stejneger's!



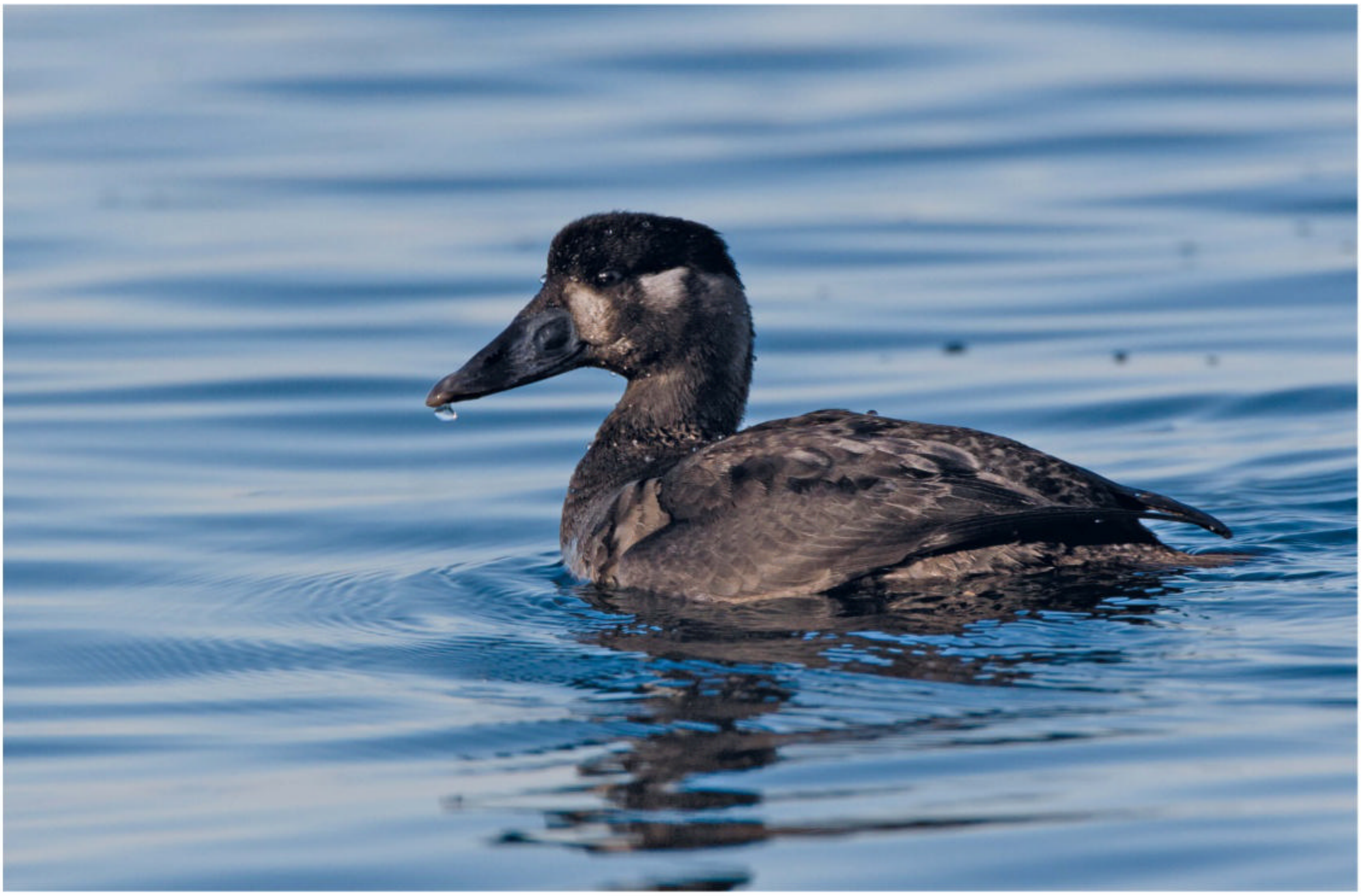
DAN'S PERCEPTIONS

EIGHTEEN: Juvenile American White-winged Scoter (Burlington, Canada, 12 December 2011). As is so often the case, the American counterparts of European species can be so much easier to study at close range, as this photograph demonstrates! The straight, more Common Eider-like head profile of this individual is similar to Stejneger's and is a reminder that some of the subtle differences discussed in this article do not necessarily remain constant, changing slightly according to the bird's mood and activity. A further useful detail, clearly visible in this image, is that the feathering on American White-winged extends further forward on the culmen than it does in Stejneger's.

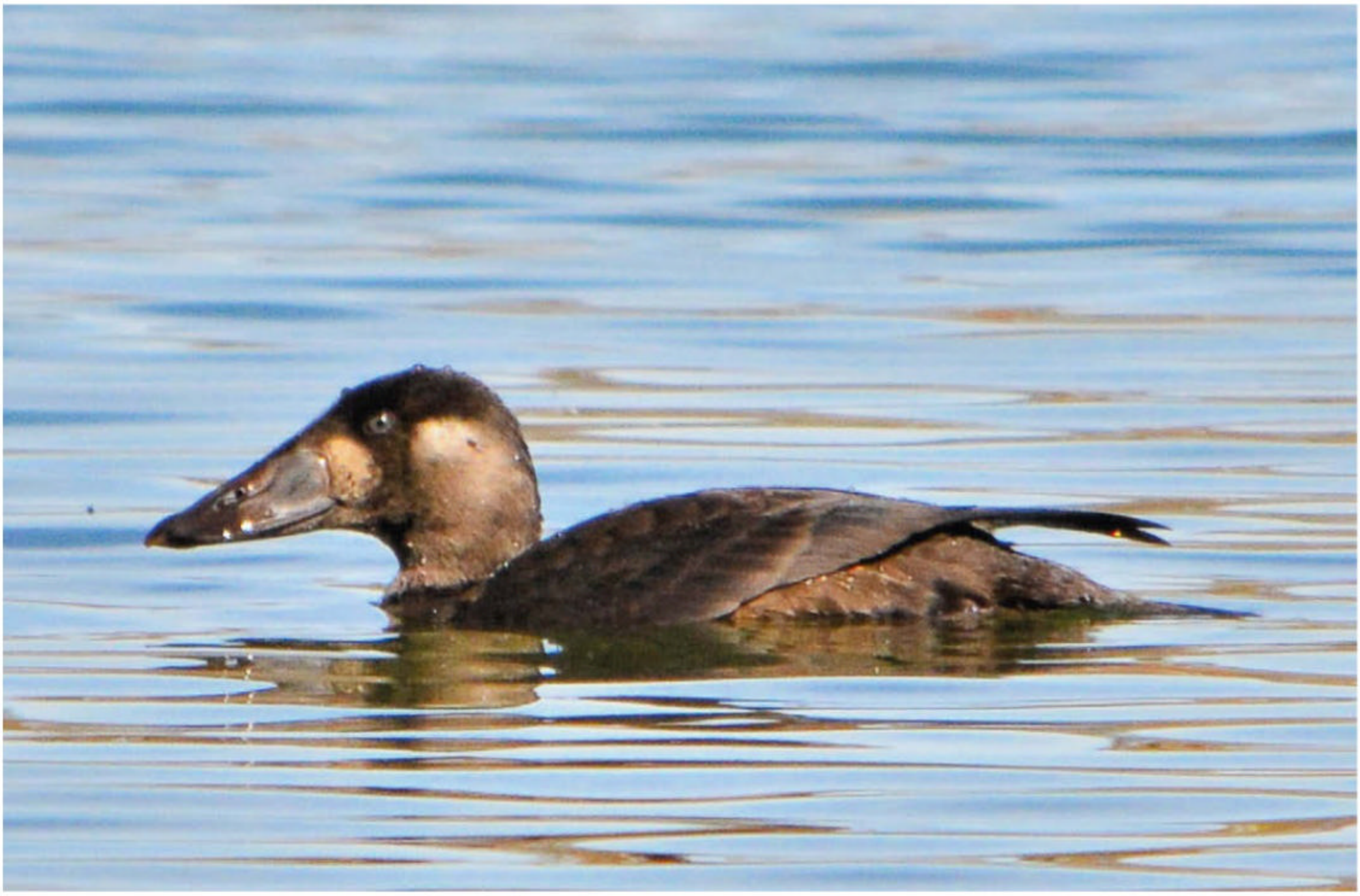


NIAL MOORES

NINETEEN: Juvenile Stejneger's Scoter (Ulleung, South Korea, 21 November 2013). This instructive image of a juvenile Stejneger's conveys the characteristic 'Roman-nosed' profile perfectly. A further small detail that helps distinguish female-type Stejneger's from American White-winged is the extent of feathering onto the culmen (the 'ridge' at the top of the bill). In American White-winged it projects a little further forward, usually to a point directly above the rear edge of the nostril; it stops further back in Stejneger's.


MARTIN SMART

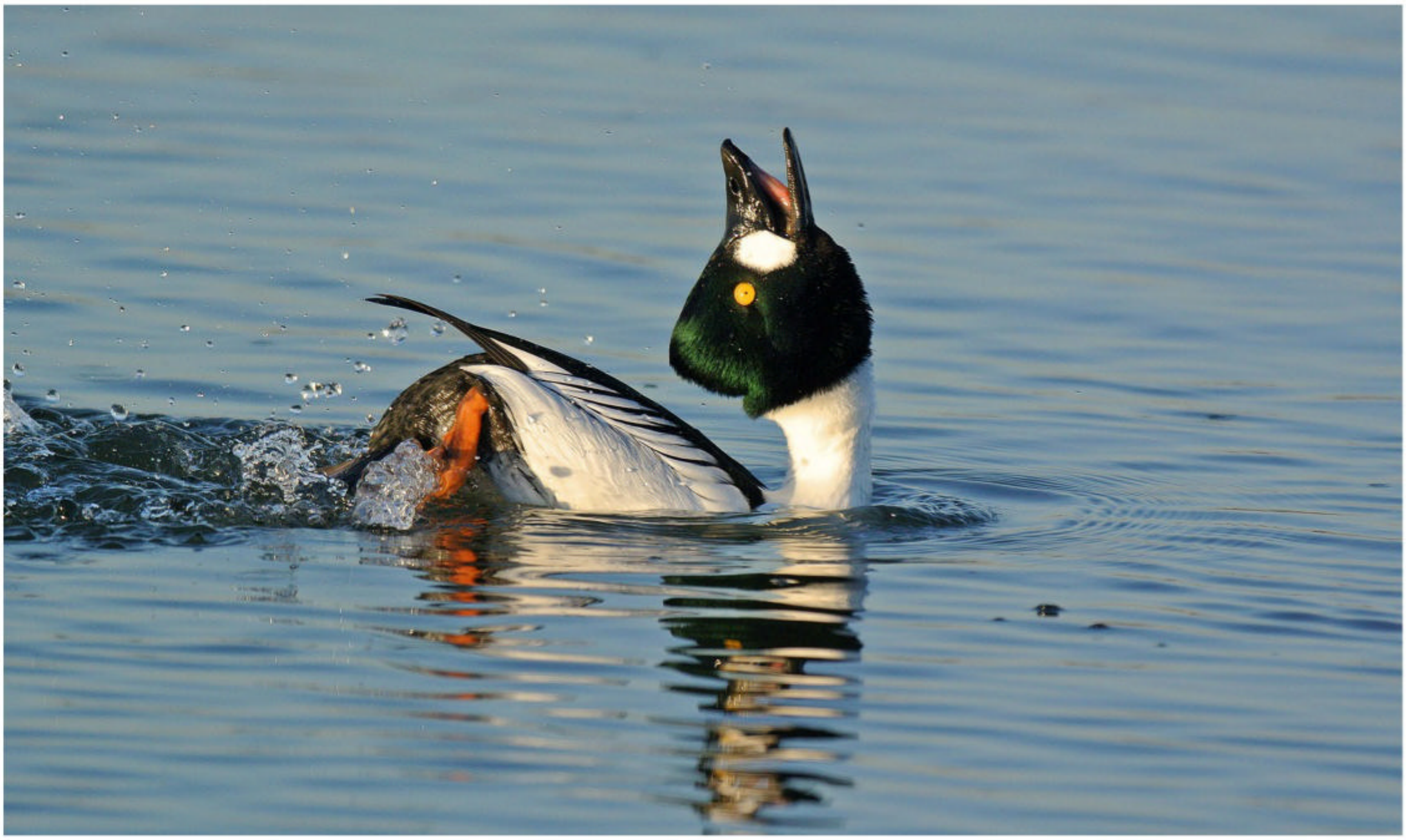
TWENTY: Juvenile female Surf Scoter (Vancouver Island, Canada, January 2008). This image serves to remind us of how superficially similar American White-winged is to Surf Scoter in female-type plumages. Confusion is not likely, however, as Surf lacks white wing-patches and is a significantly smaller bird overall.


JOHN BREITSCH

TWENTY ONE: Juvenile male Surf Scoter (Denver, Colorado, USA, 19 October 2013). The straight, Common Eider-like profile in this image is similar to Stejneger's Scoter, but the lack of white in the wing or extensive feathering onto the base of the bill leaves absolutely no room for confusion!

# Common and Barrow's Goldeneyes and Bufflehead

Words by Chris Harbard



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

ONE: Adult male Common Goldeneye (Seaforth, Lancashire, 14 January 2012). This drake Common Goldeneye is unmistakable as it displays to a female. The male's courtship begins in winter and involves throwing its head back and pointing the bill skywards, while calling and kicking its feet up out of the water. The green sheen on the dark, peaked head and the almost circular white loral patch in front of the bright yellow eye are characteristic of this species. Note the long white scapular feathers with thin black edges, draping down in a line above the flanks, separating the intense black back from the brilliant white underparts.

A rare breeding species in Britain, Common Goldeneye is much more widespread and familiar as a winter visitor. While completely different from our resident ducks, it is potentially confusable with two rare vagrants from North America (although the first also has a small breeding population in Iceland): the similar Barrow's Goldeneye and the more easily distinguished Bufflehead. Males are relatively straightforward, but the much more similar females and immatures present their own identification challenges. Chris Harbard assesses the confusion risks in all plumages, as well as for birds in flight.

# Basic Principles

Diving ducks are fun to watch but can be difficult to identify as they spend a lot of time submerged. One of the most striking is Common Goldeneye, a rare breeding bird in Britain, but a widespread and familiar winter visitor. A favourite among the diving ducks, it is usually found on inland waterbodies, as well as sheltered coastal areas. It can be easily distinguished from most other species, but two vagrants from North America provide interesting identification challenges.

Barrow's Goldeneye is closely related and looks similar, and Bufflehead, while in the same genus, *Bucephala*, is a little more distinctive. The identity of these two species will rarely be in question, but there are individuals (particularly females and immatures) which defy positive identification, as well as interesting problems involving birds that may be hybrids between Common and Barrow's. Also, with any unusual wildfowl species, there is always the problem of determining whether any bird is truly wild or simply an escape.

## Common Goldeneye

This species breeds across northern Europe, Asia and North America and winters to the south. It is a rare breeding bird in Britain, with 100-200 females, mainly in Scotland. In winter about 20,000 individuals arrive and are fairly widespread, with concentrations in estuaries like the Forth and Humber, as well as on inland waters such as Abberton Reservoir, Essex, and Rutland Water, Rutland. There are two subspecies, with the North American form *americana* being slightly larger than the Eurasian *clangula*, and having a larger bill.

The adult male has striking black-and-white plumage. Its large black head has a green gloss and a white loral spot which appears egg shaped or circular. The neck, breast and underparts are bright white, the back is black, and the white scapulars are broken by lines of black.

First-winter males look more like females, with a browner head, and some may have an indistinct crescent-shaped loral spot for a short time, looking similar in plumage to Barrow's Goldeneye; however, this spot always reaches below the eye.

Head shape is critical when trying to distinguish between the goldeneyes. Imagine a line along the lower edge of the bill and another along the front of the forehead. In Barrow's these are virtually at right angles, while in Common they are at more of an acute angle, giving it a 'peaked' look. The eyes of adult males are a bright yellow, while females are pale yellow to white.

## Barrow's Goldeneye

Barrow's breeds mainly in north-western North America, wintering along the Pacific coast and also inland. Small numbers breed in eastern Canada and Greenland, wintering along the east coast of North America, while a mainly resident population nests in Iceland. It is monotypic.

There have been four accepted UK records. The first was in Ayrshire in November-December 1979, with the next in Aberdeenshire in May-June 2005. An individual was present from November-April in 2005-06, 2006-07 and 2007-08 in Co Down, and the fourth was in Perthshire from November 2006 to April 2007.

The exact origin of birds recorded in Britain and Ireland is unclear; as all accepted reports have been adult males, it may be that females and immatures are being overlooked. As a sociable species, any vagrant is quite likely to associate with Common Goldeneyes and would appear slightly larger.

Adult male Barrow's Goldeneye is distinctive. Its black head has a blue-green sheen and there is a large crescent-shaped white patch in front of the eye which extends above it. Its back is black and the white scapulars are broken by neat rows of large black patches. A black spur extends down the side of the white breast from the front of the wing. First-winter males will have a browner head.

The female has a darker brown head than Common, with a rounded crown (not peaked), and a shorter but stouter bill, sometimes being largely orange. In flight, the wing contains less white on the secondaries and coverts than Common. Bill colour is useful when trying to separate female Common from Barrow's Goldeneye, but first-winter females of both species may have dark bills at the start of the winter.

The eyes of adult males are a bright yellow, while females are dark yellow, not as pale as Common Goldeneye. Although difficult to see in the field, the nostrils differ in shape and can be seen right through in Barrow's but not in Common.

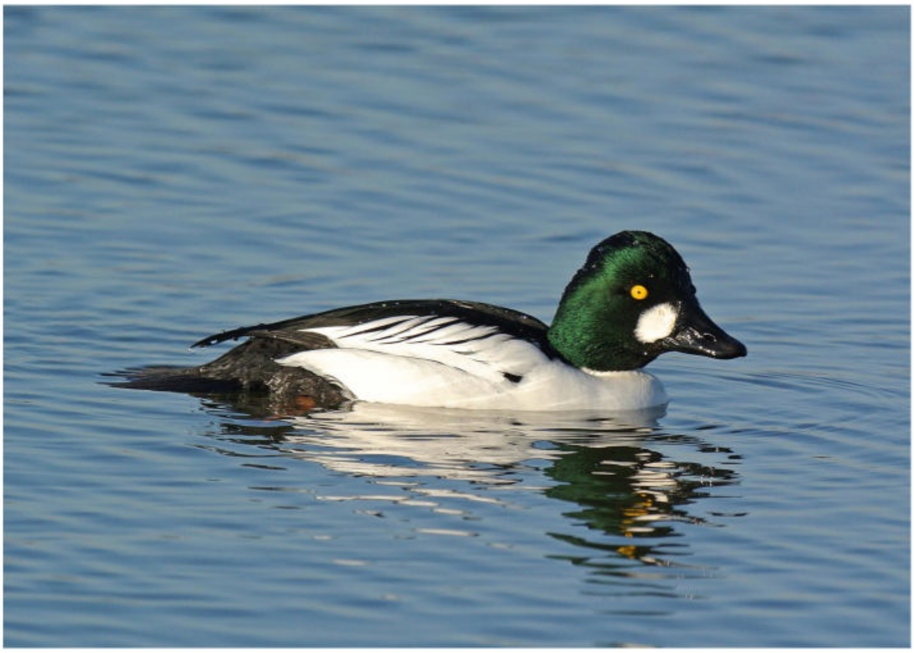
## Bufflehead

The small and distinctive Bufflehead breeds in Alaska and eastwards across most of Canada, wintering down to the south of North America. The adult male is strikingly obvious, with a black, green and purple glossed 'puffy' head with a large white patch extending back from the eye and around the neck, a black back and white underparts.

The female is largely brownish, with a darker head and a clear white auricular patch extending back from behind and below the eye. In flight the female shows less white on the inner secondaries. Although the same genus as the goldeneyes, Bufflehead is notably different in having dark brown irises when adult.

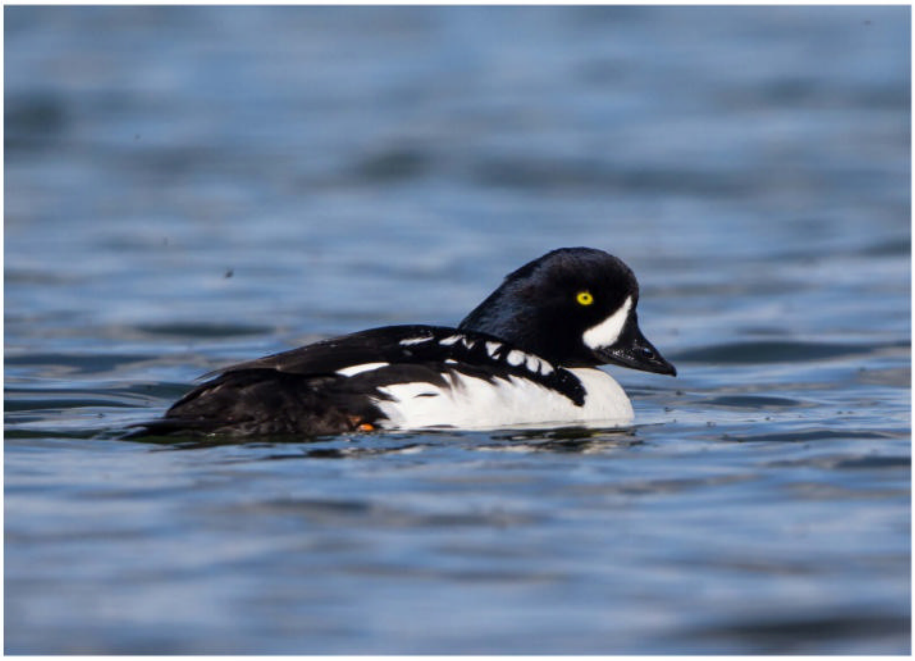
There have been 17 accepted occurrences in Britain up to 2014, mostly in the period October to April. Five were in Scotland and 12 in England, the most recent being in October 2014 on Orkney. Ireland has had just two accepted records. Most have involved adult males.

Bufflehead is popular in captivity and colour-ringed birds are occasionally seen, presumably all escapes. The second half of October and November is the classic period for Nearctic wildfowl to appear in Britain and any seemingly wild unringed bird appearing at this time is more likely to be genuine.



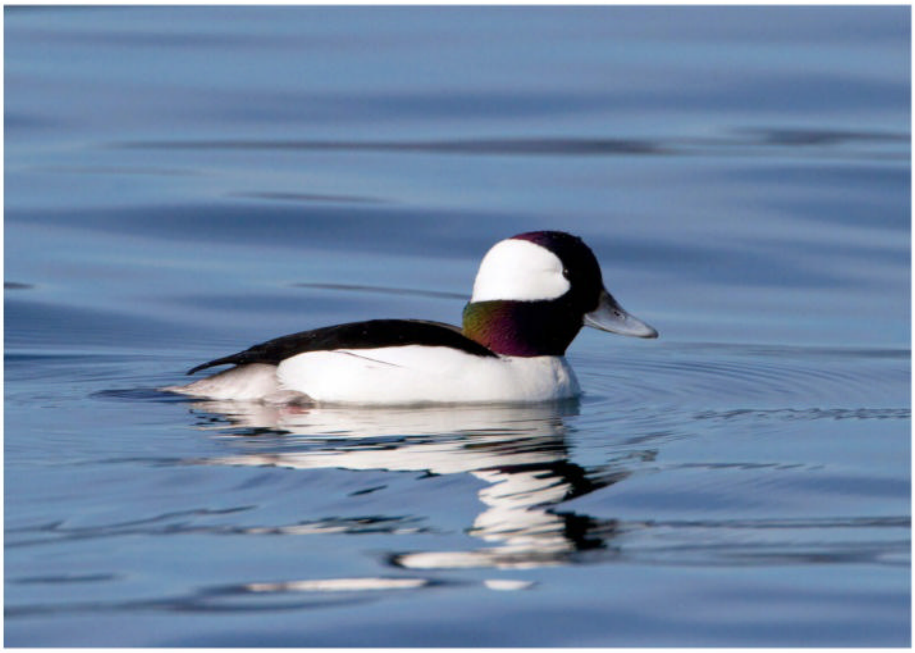
STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

TWO: Adult male Common Goldeneye (Seaforth, Lancashire, 14 January 2012). This Common Goldeneye has just surfaced from a dive, with gleaming water droplets on its back. Its most conspicuous defining feature is the white oval on the face, in front of and below the eye. The dark head shines green in good light, but otherwise appears black. The neck, breast, underparts and flanks are white, while the back, primaries, tail and undertail are black. Note the pattern of the scapulars: white with thin black streaks across them. Look at the black beak and imagine a line along the bottom of the bill, and another along the forehead – the two meet at a reasonably sharp angle.



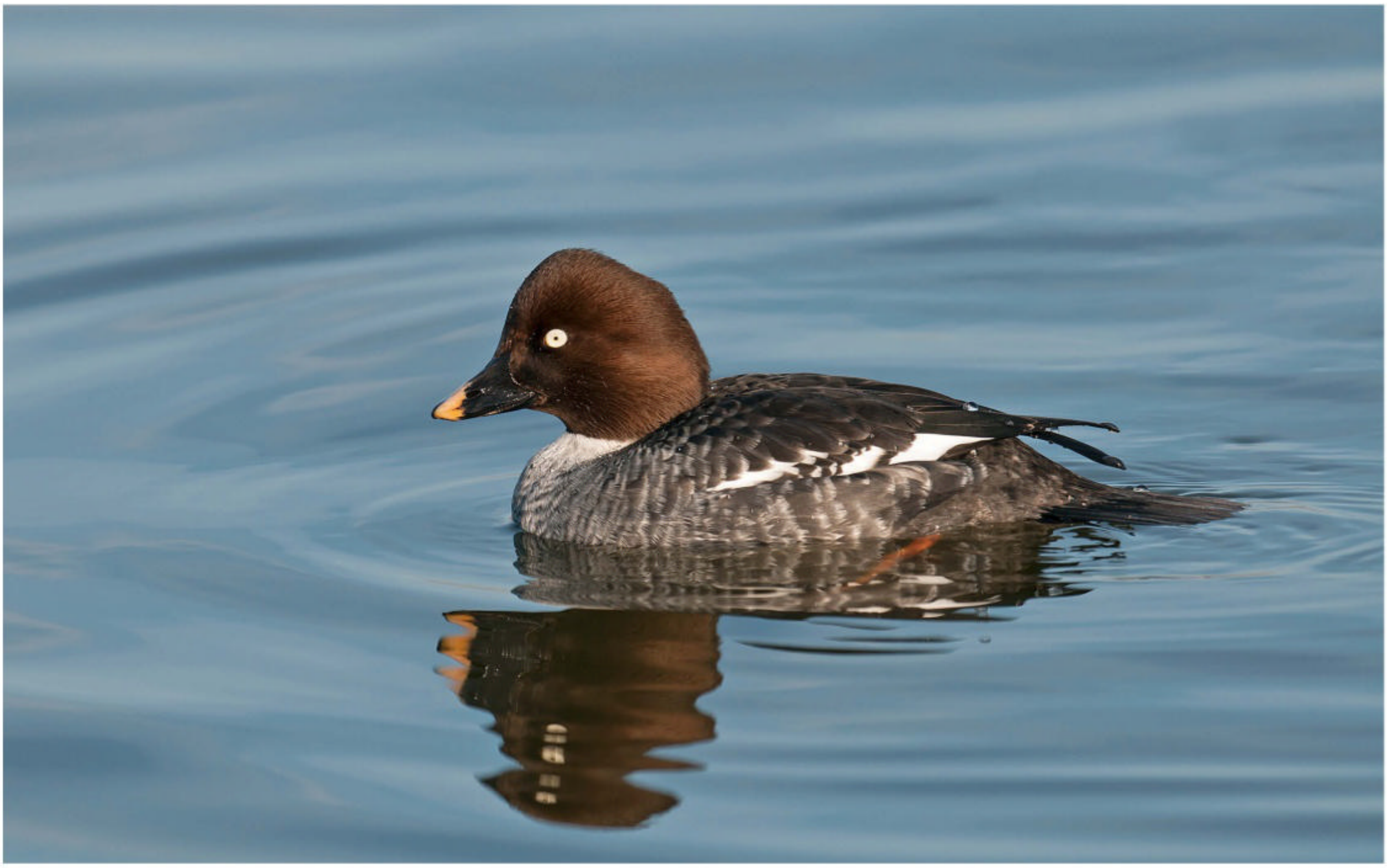
CONOR MOLLOY

THREE: Adult male Barrow's Goldeneye (Lake Mývatn, Iceland, 8 June 2016). On drake Barrow's Goldeneye, the white loral patch is crescent shaped and extends to just above the eye. The dark head has a blue-green sheen and is less peaked, more rounded, than that of Common. The body is similar to Common Goldeneye, but the broader black edgings to the white scapulars make a more patched appearance, and the black upperparts extend further forward onto the breast, with more black on the upper flanks. The bill is shorter and stouter; again, imagine lines along its base and along the forehead, which meet almost at right angles. If you look closely, you can see through the nostrils (unlike in Common Goldeneye).



MARTIN SMART

FOUR: Adult male Bufflehead (British Columbia, Canada, 3 March 2015). Bufflehead is named for its large, rounded head, and the head pattern of the drake is unlike any other duck. Its huge, white auricular patch extends back from the eye, wrapping around the back of its contrasting black head, which has a purple-green sheen. Unlike its relatives, the goldeneyes, it has a dark eye and the bill is blue-grey. It has a black back and rump, with grey tail coverts and tail. Its neck, breast and belly are white and it has pure white scapulars. It is smaller than the goldeneyes and also a frequent diver.



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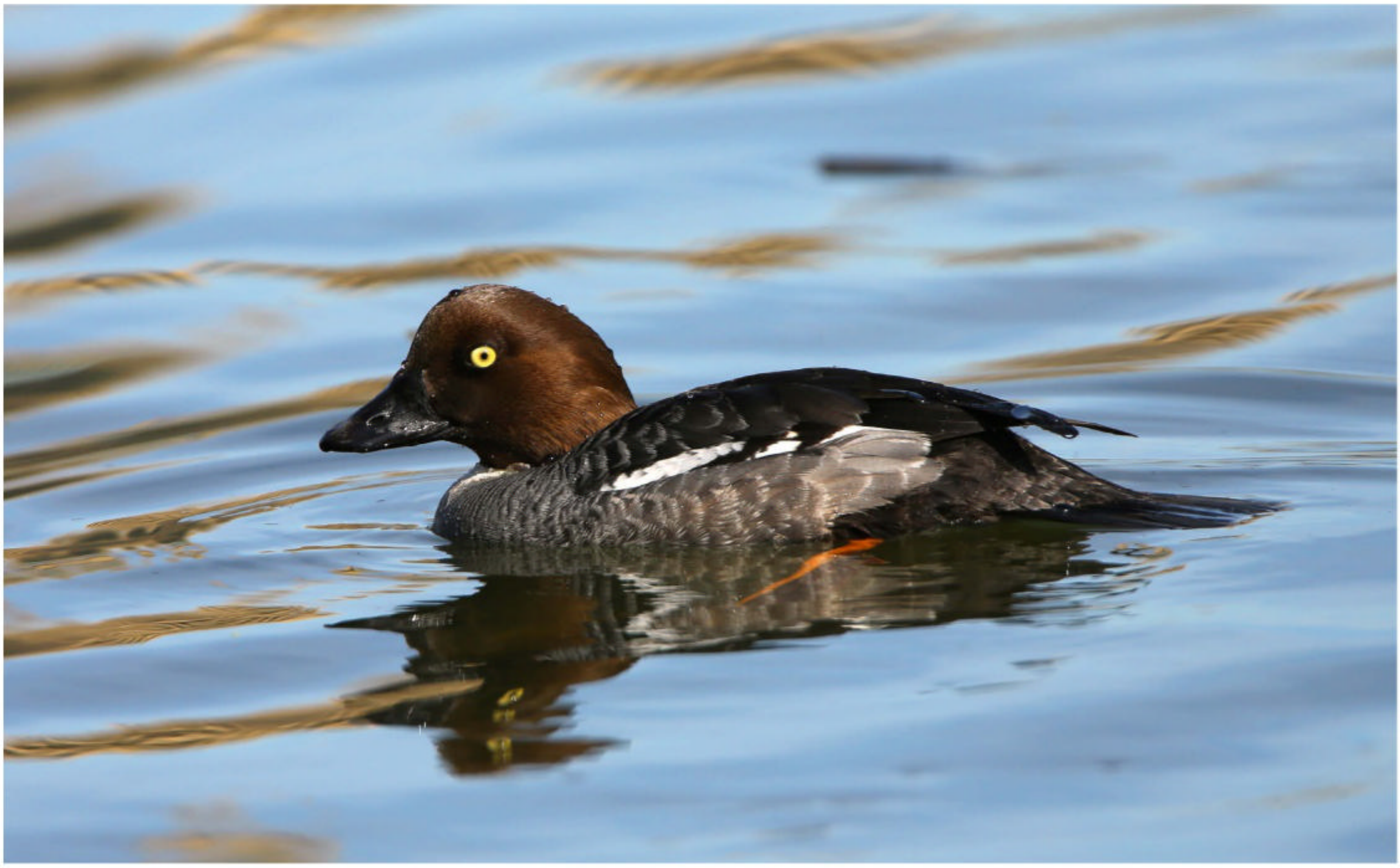
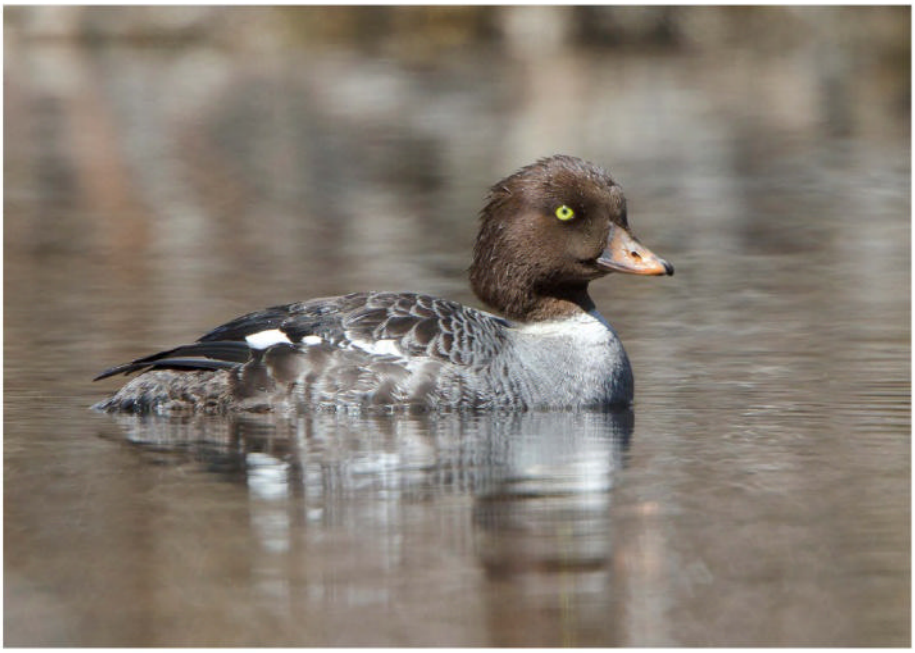
FIVE: Adult female Common Goldeneye (Seaforth, Lancashire, 28 January 2009). The rich, chocolate-brown head of female Common Goldeneye has a distinctive 'peaked' shape, almost triangular, and ends abruptly on a white neck. Its underparts are greyish and birds on the water usually show some of the white from their wings and wing coverts, which looks like a broken white line above the flanks. The eye is almost white and the beak is black with a yellow tip, but some birds have all-black bills or pinkish tips and others (probably immatures) occasionally having most of the bill yellowish.



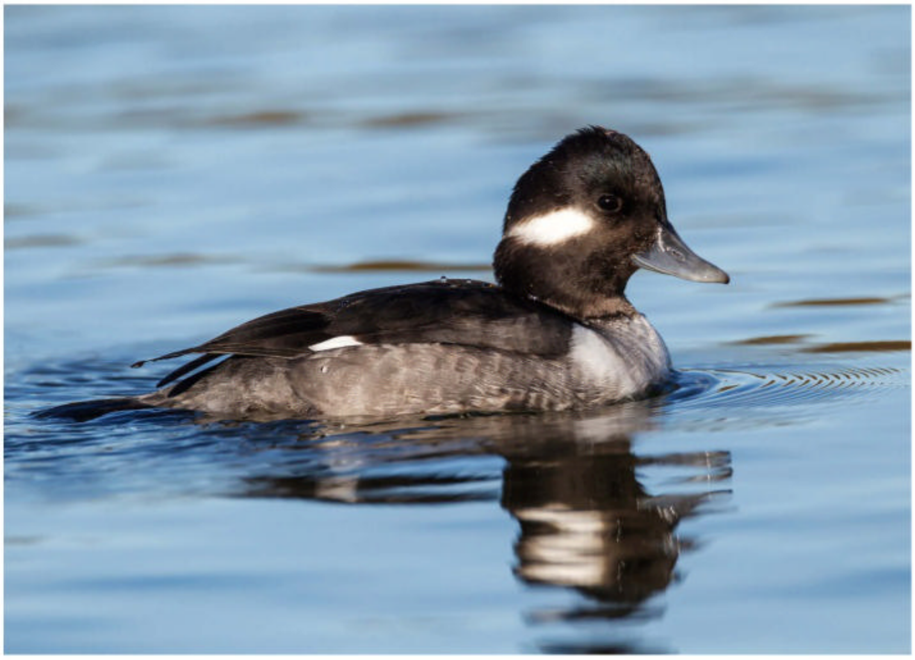
AURÉLIEN AUDEVARD

SIX: Adult female Common Goldeneye (California, USA, 5 February 2016). This female has just surfaced from a dive and the head does not appear markedly peaked, but imagining a line along the angle of the forehead and another along the lower line of the bill base still holds good, as it makes a sharp angle. The bill looks long, almost as long as the head, which is longer than Barrow's. The flank line, greyish flanks and darker back are the same in both goldeneyes. This individual has a pale yellow eye and is the americana form, having a larger bill than the Eurasian subspecies in photo 5.



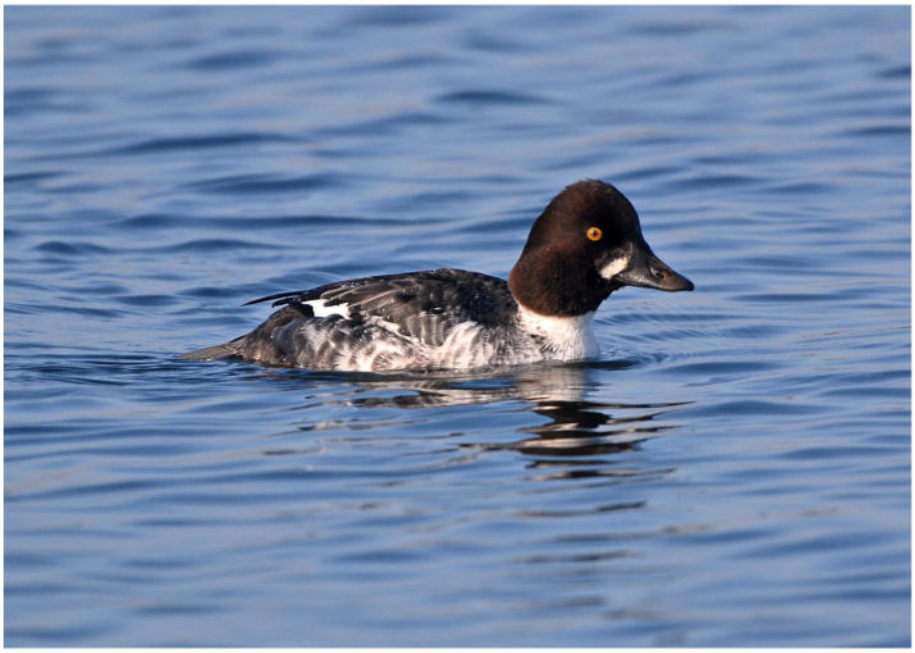
GLENN BARTLEY (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

SEVEN: Adult female Barrow's Goldeneye (British Columbia, Canada, 19 May 2011). This bird shows the typical brown head and yellow eye of a goldeneye, but the brown almost forms a 'mane' on the back of the neck. The bill on this bird is mostly orange which suggests Barrow's Goldeneye; the clinching feature is the head shape, which is clearly rounded. The forehead is steep, and drawing imaginary lines produces a virtual right angle. Some female Barrow's Goldeneyes from North America can have a bill which is mostly bright orange, which Icelandic birds and Common Goldeneyes do not show. Icelandic birds have an orangish-tipped bill with a dark base.



BRIAN E SMALL (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

EIGHT: Adult female Bufflehead (California, USA, 12 December 2012). As small as a Black-necked Grebe, this tiny duck is distinctive, with its large dark brown head and oval-shaped white patch below and behind the eye. It may show a small white patch on the closed wing but often doesn't. Its eye is dark, its beak is grey and, if seen, its feet are also grey. Young males look similar to females before they moult into adult plumage.



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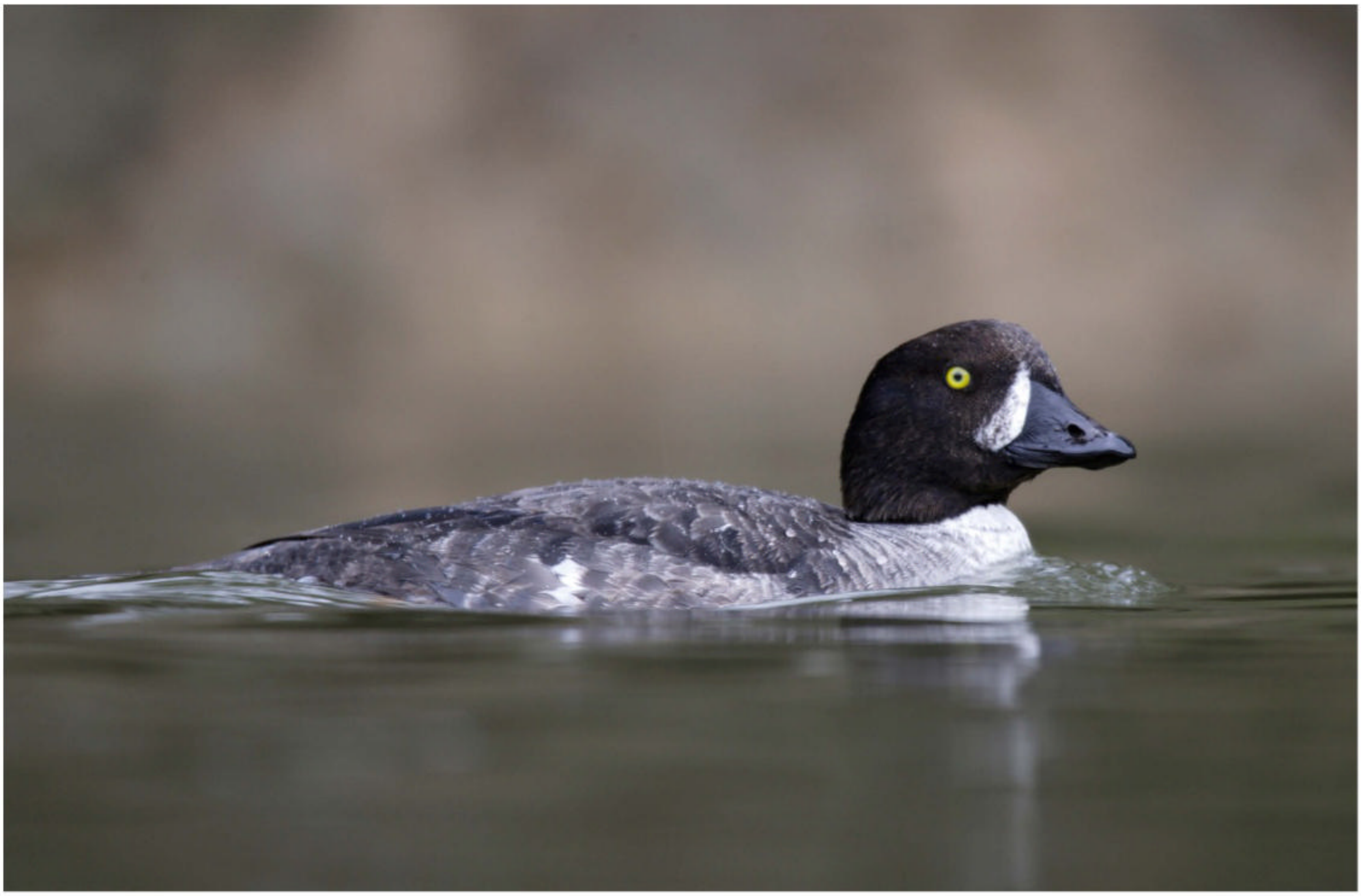
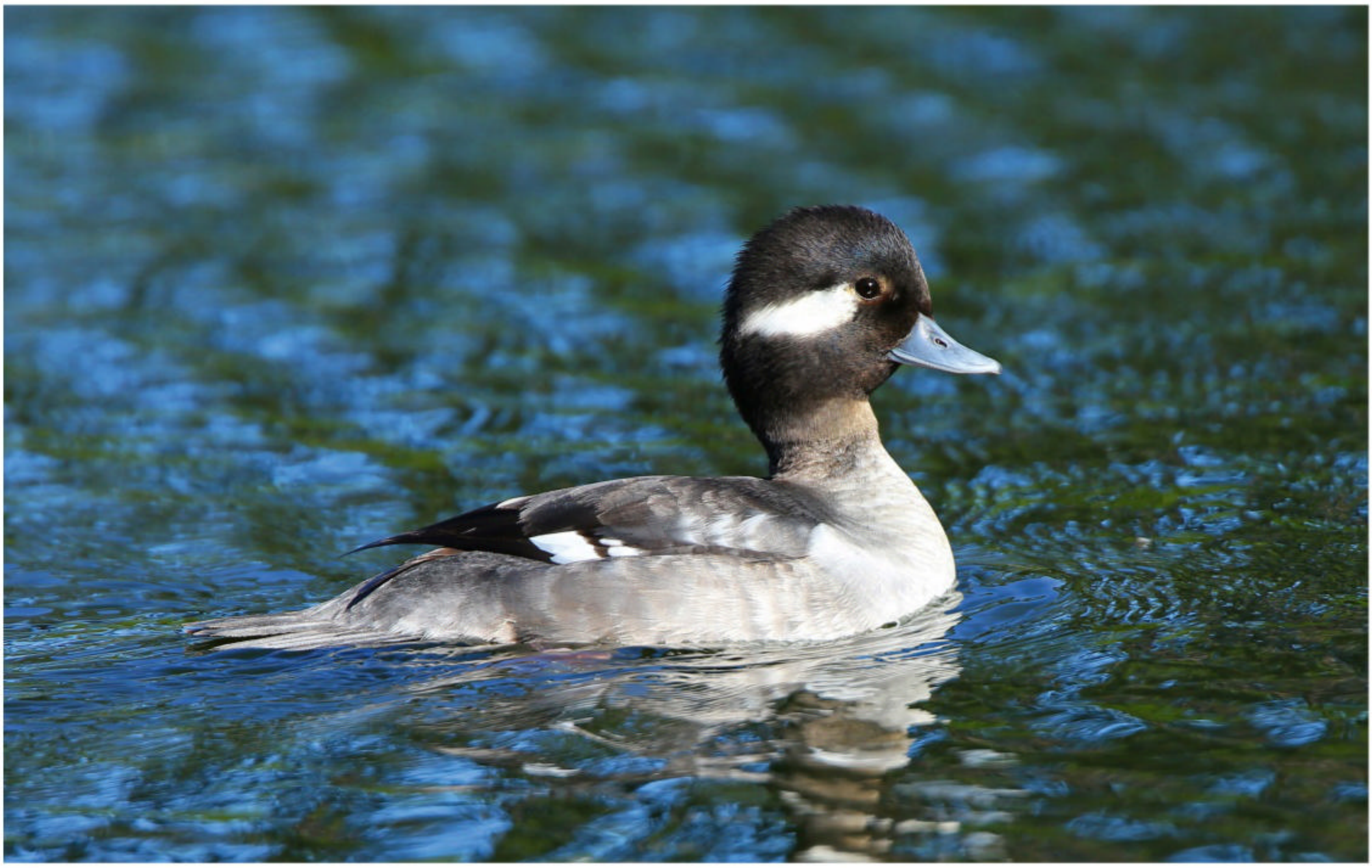
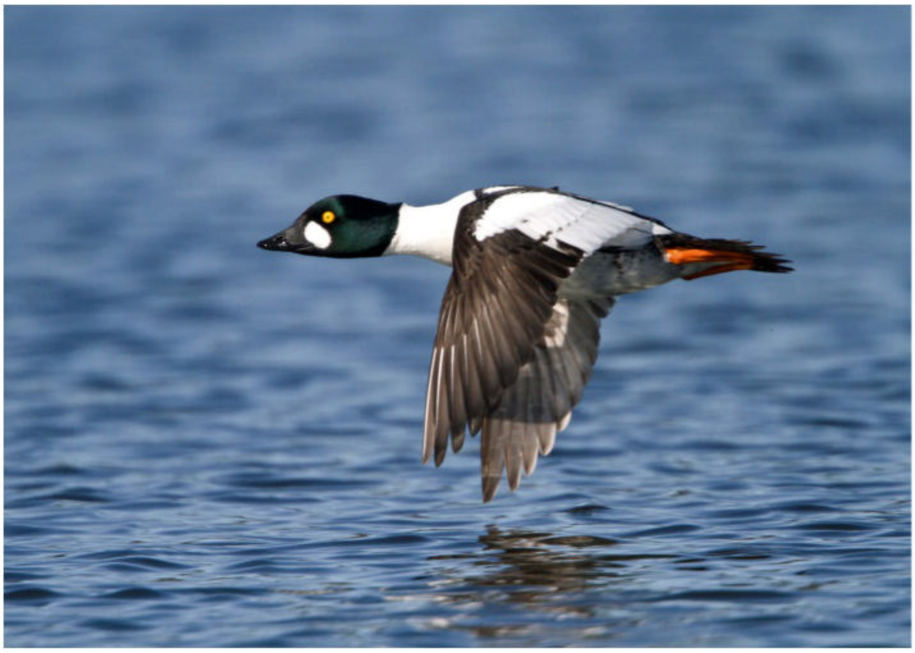
NINE: First-winter male Common Goldeneye (Seaforth, Lancashire, 3 February 2007). Young male Common Goldeneyes look very like females and as they gradually attain the plumage features of an adult they can look a little puzzling. This bird does not have a full white face patch yet and looks similar to Barrow's Goldeneye of the same age. However, note the 'peaked' head with a sloping forehead. Look closely at the white patch which is slightly below the bottom of the beak – it would not reach down so far in Barrow's. Eclipse males can look similar to this.


MIKE DANZENBAKER (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

TEN: First-winter male Barrow's Goldeneye (California, USA, 3 February 2008). Looking quite like a female, this young male Barrow's Goldeneye still has a dark brown head, but it has already attained its crescent-shaped white face patch, which reaches higher than in Common Goldeneye and only goes down to the base of the bill. Note the rounded, almost flat-headed profile and stouter beak when compared to Common Goldeneye in photo 9. Eclipse males can look similar to this.

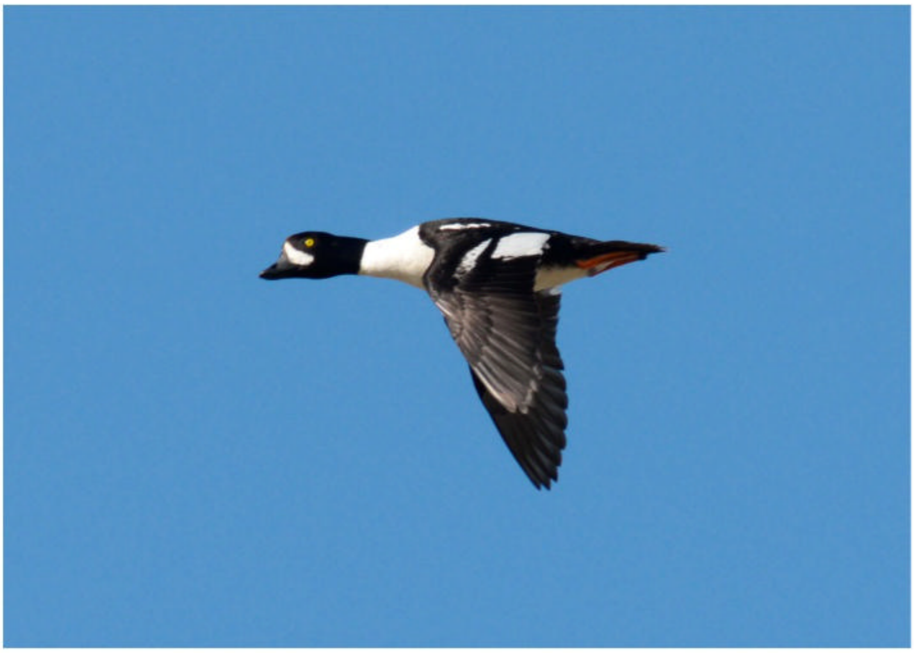

AURÉLIEN AUDEVARD

ELEVEN: First-winter male Bufflehead (California, USA, 1 February 2016). This bird is starting to get the features of an adult male. Its beak is blue-grey, its underparts are getting paler and the white face patch is getting bigger and reaches right up to the back of the dark eye. This plumage can last through the bird's first winter and into its second summer. The underparts become fully white, the back black and the auricular patch covers the neck by its second winter.



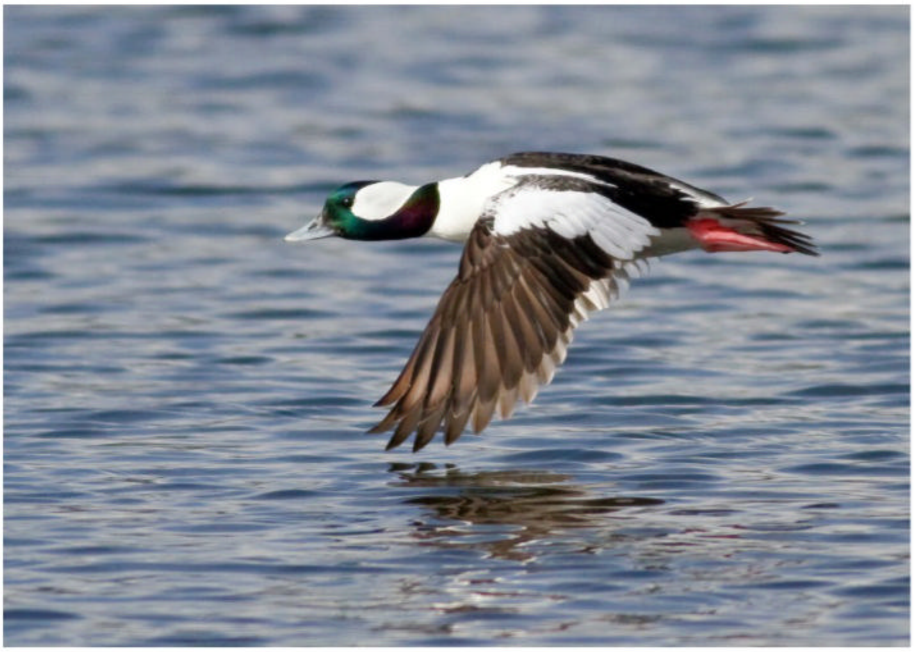
GLENN BARTLEY (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

TWELVE: Adult male Common Goldeneye (British Columbia, Canada, 3 March 2011). In flight Common Goldeneye appears quite short necked and the drake has fast, whistling wing-beats. A large amount of white can be seen in the wings, as seven or eight secondaries and the greater and median coverts all appear bright white, forming an unbroken panel. The wing coverts actually have dark bases which are usually not visible. If seen, the scapulars usually appear as a solid white lines along the black back.



LAURENS STEIJN (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

THIRTEEN: Adult male Barrow's Goldeneye (Lake Mývatn, Iceland, 18 June 2012). In flight Barrow's Goldeneye has similar fast wing-beats and whistling wings to Common. This bird clearly shows much less white on the wing than drakes of that species. Six or so of the secondaries are white and the bases of the greater and median coverts are black, forming two different white patches separated by a black band. This means the patch is narrower and does not extend so far to the front of the wing. If seen, the scapulars may appear as a broken white line.



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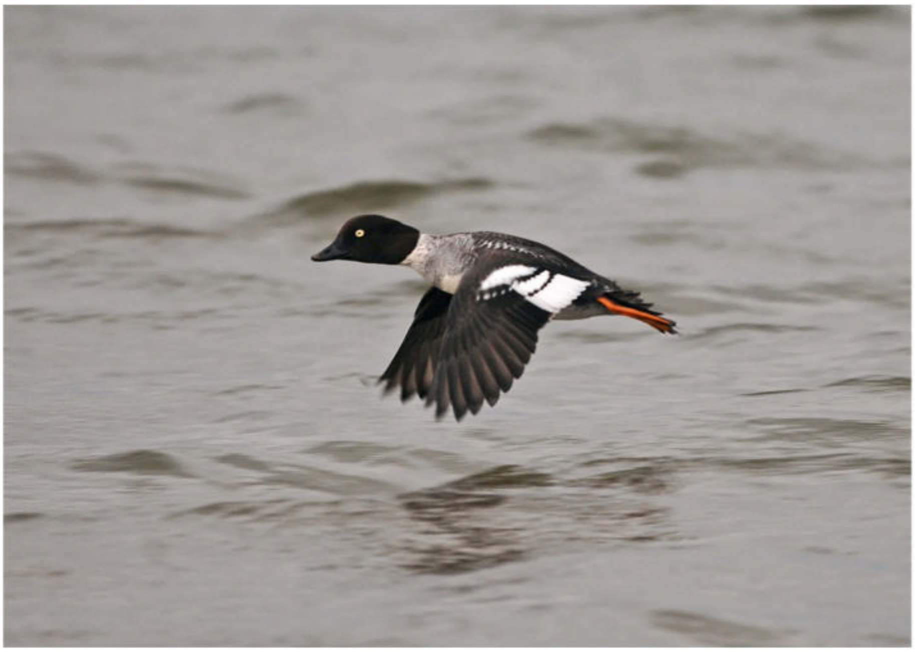
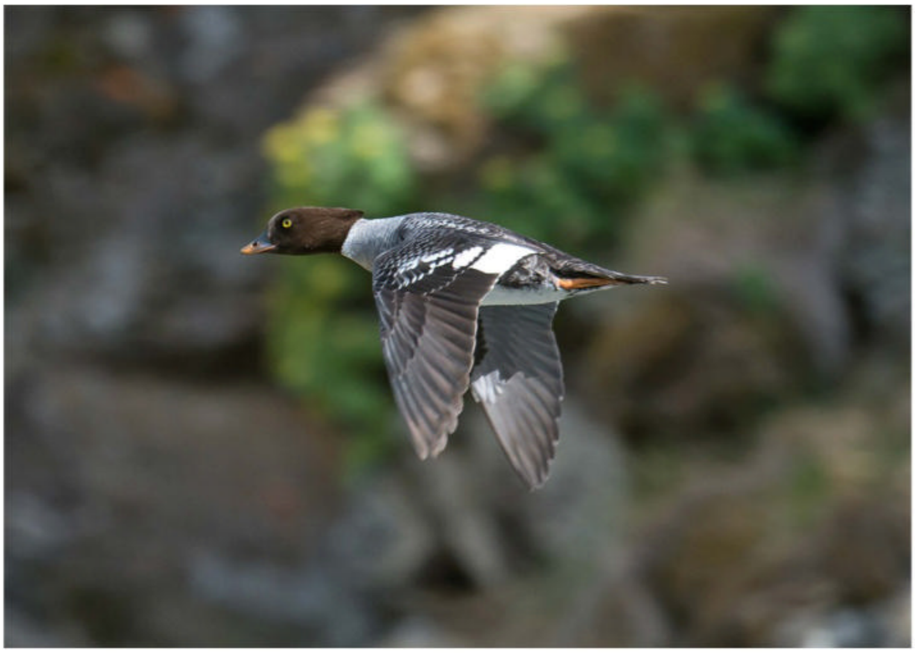
FOURTEEN: Adult male Bufflehead (British Columbia, Canada, 28 February 2009). At first glance a male Bufflehead in flight resembles a small, fast Common Goldeneye, but with silent wings. It has a similar wing pattern, with a narrow white patch formed by six secondaries and their associated coverts, with the median coverts also being all white. The white of the neck and upper back joins white of the scapulars to form a distinct pattern with the rest of the black back. The uppertail coverts are grey.

FIFTEEN: Adult female Common Goldeneye (Seaforth, Lancashire, 4 November 2006). A good view of the wings of a female Common Goldeneye in flight can help with its identification. Seven or more secondaries and their associated coverts are largely white. The greater secondary coverts have black tips which form a bar between these coverts and the secondaries, with the median coverts also having black tips separating them from the greater coverts with a second bar. This wide white area, broken by the two black bars, is seldom found in Barrow's. Wings of immatures (both males and females) are similar to this.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

SIXTEEN: Adult female Barrow's Goldeneye (Lake Mývatn, Iceland, 13 June 2012). Fewer than seven secondaries are white in female Barrow's Goldeneye, making the white wing patch noticeably narrower than in Common. The white greater coverts have black bases and tips, and the median coverts can be black with white tips or mostly white, and extending out further across the wing forming an indistinct white-and-black patch. This creates a narrower white area broken by one or two black bars. Wings of immatures (both males and females) are similar to this.



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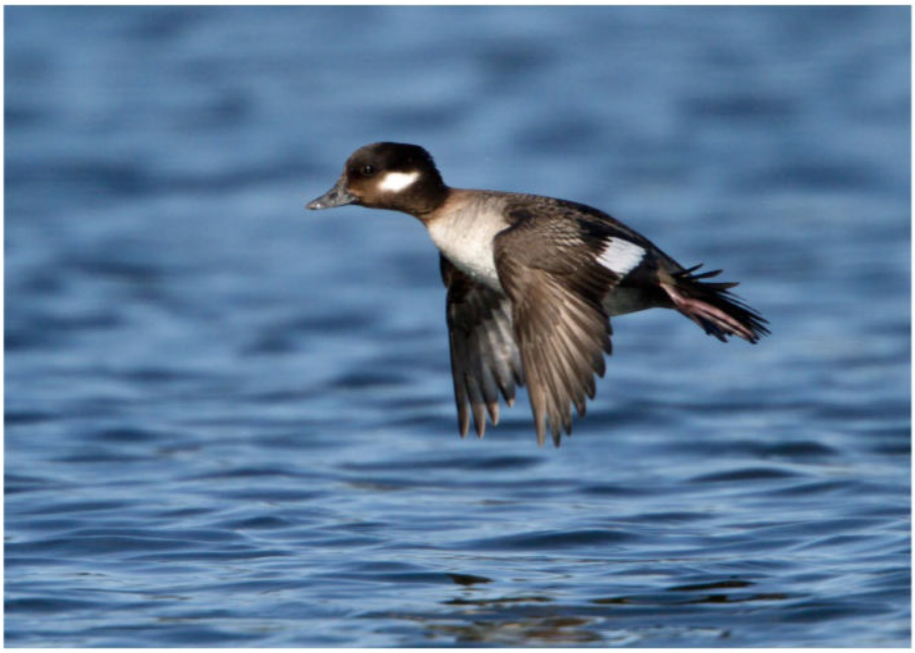
SEVENTEEN: Adult female Bufflehead (British Columbia, Canada, 3 March 2011). A female Bufflehead can look a little like a small female Common Goldeneye, as its pale auricular patch may not be so obvious in flight. However, the wing pattern is very different as it shows white on six of the inner secondaries and often none on the secondary coverts, which are brown, although there is sometimes a small white line on the greater coverts. This results in a much reduced white wing patch. The body is dull brown with white central underparts and the head noticeably dark.



GLENN BARTLEY (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

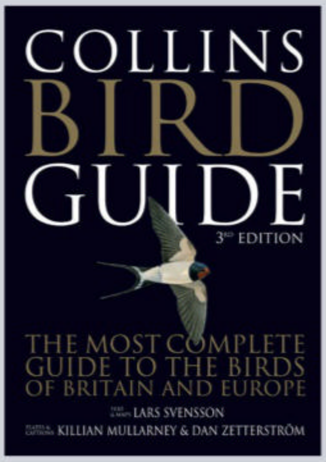
# Further Reading

EUROPE'S BIRDS
An identification guide
Rob Hume, Robert Still,
Andy Swash and Hugh Harrop
BirdLife

### *Europe's Birds: An Identification Guide* by Andy Swash, Rob Hume, Hugh Harrop and Robert Still

Detailed descriptions provide the information necessary to identify the birds of Europe in all their plumages – male, female, breeding, non-breeding, adult and immatures, as well as distinctive subspecies – yet *Europe's Birds* is easy-to-use, practical and accessible. Birders of any ability will benefit from the clear text, details on range, status and habitat, and an unrivalled selection of photographs.

### *Collins Bird Guide* by Lars Svensson, Killian Mullarney and Dan Zetterström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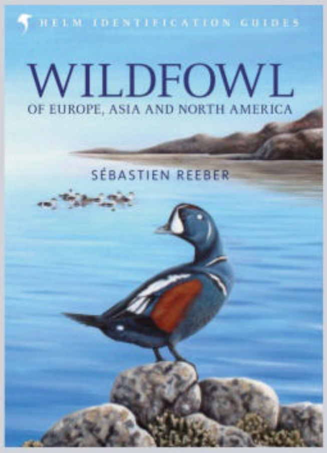
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WILDFOWL
OF EUROPE, ASIA AND NORTH AMERICA
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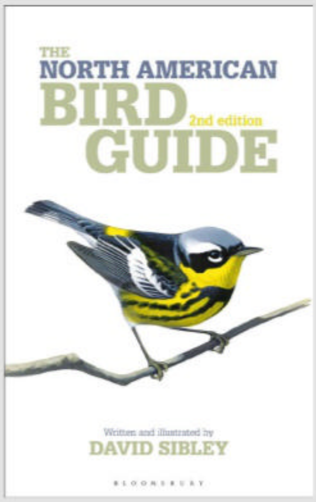
### *Wildfowl of Europe, Asia and North America* by Sébastien Reeber

This guide features current knowledge on the identification of ducks, geese and swans in Europe, Asia and North America, including the many of the species covered in this photo guide. The book provides an unrivalled level of detail and a wealth of information essential for anyone interested in this fascinating group of birds.

### *The North American Bird Guide* by David Sibley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NORTH AMERICAN
BIRD
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GUIDE
Written and illustrated by
DAVID SIBLEY
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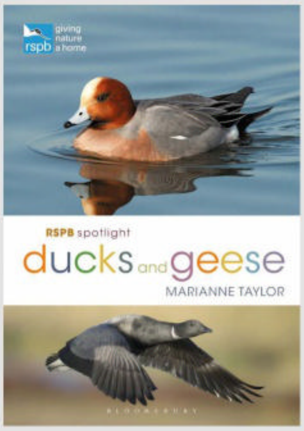
This excellent field guide to the birds of North America. It will add to your understanding of these two similar species, helping you identify them if you discover a candidate in Britain, as well as improve your understanding of all North American birds. This second edition features updated texts and improved images.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### *RSPB Spotlight: Ducks and Geese* by Marianne Taylor

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### *Frontiers in Birding* by Martin Garner and Friends

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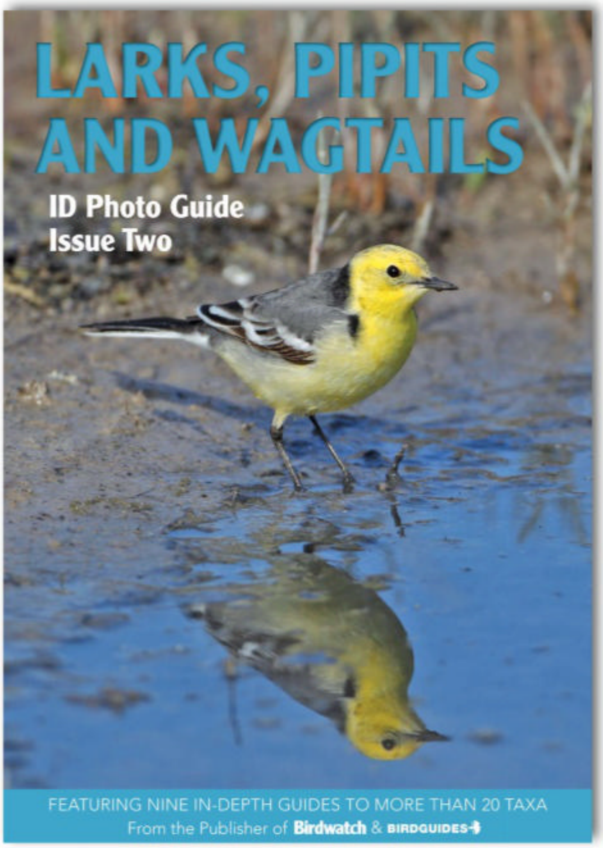
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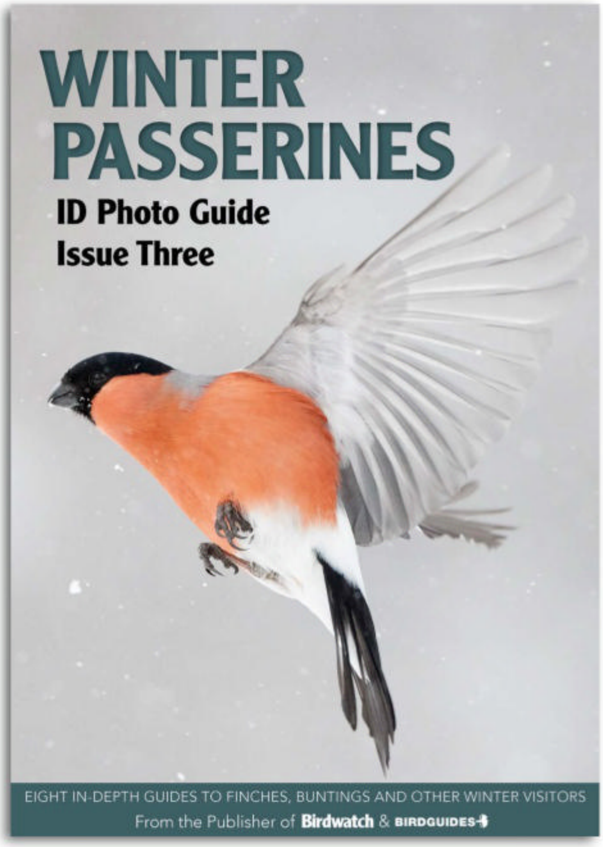
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